

LAST TANGO IN PARIS

Robert Alley



THE JUDAS SHEEP

Jan Roberts



THE FEAR DEALERS

Robin Cade



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LONDON

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LAST TANGO IN PARIS

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The story of the film

*'Last Tango in Paris' is published by
Quicksilver Books, Inc.*

An **ALBERTO GRIMALDI** Production

**Marlon
Brando**

in

**Last
Tango in
Paris**

A Film by **Bernardo Bertolucci**

with

MARIA SCHNEIDER

MARIA MICHI • GIOVANNA GALLETTI

and with

JEAN-PIERRE LEAUD

also starring

MASSIMO GIROTTI

Produced by **ALBERTO GRIMALDI**

Directed by **BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI**

A Coproduction

PEA Produzioni Europee Associate S. A. S.—ROMÉ

Les Productions Artistes Associes S. A.—PARIS

UNITED ARTISTS

CHAPTER ONE

DAZZLING WINTER SUNLIGHT played among the fluted arches of the ornate railway bridge, casting a latticework shadow over the dark waters of the Seine. Below the elevated Metro, along a walkway resembling the interior of some vast and sumptuous hall, pedestrians advanced and passed one another in silence, locked in a strange and compelling ritual. Flowering columns of blue-grey iron completed the illusion of an island of Art Nouveau, suspended in time. The distant January sun could add no warmth to the scene's splendid decline, violated by the earthy smell of the river, the reek of burnt chestnuts drifting up from the quay, the shriek of punished metal as the train clattered overhead. The long lament of its whistle marked the prelude of an exquisite and irrepressible concerto. The dance had begun.

Two people crossing the bridge, moving in the same direction, were already locked into this mutual cadence, though they did not suspect it, had never met, and could not have explained this curious conjunction of time and circumstance that had brought them together. To each of them the bridge, the day, the Paris skyline and the conditions of their own existence meant something entirely different, or nothing at all, and any chance of an encounter would have seemed infinitesimal.

His profile was like that of a hawk, arrogant and uncompromising even in grief, for he was weeping as he aimlessly ambled from column to column. His body was thick and heavily muscled, and he moved with the physical carelessness of an ageing athlete, running blunt fingers through his hair, shoving a workman's hands into the pockets of his camelhair overcoat, which was slightly soiled but well-cut in the style made notorious by certain American gangsters. His shirt was

open, exposing a bullish neck. During the passing of the train, he raised his face and screamed an obscenity into its clamour. At that moment his face, though unshaven and tormented, reflected an angular precision and a delicacy about the mouth and eyes that was almost feminine, at the same time he seemed coarse, brutish. He was about forty-five years old, and handsome in a dissolute way. Other men, confronting him in the shadow of the arches, stepped aside.

The girl was half his age. She wore a soft brown felt hat at a rakish angle and the impetuous expression of the young and the beautiful. Her walk was provocative to the point of impertinence, she swung her handbag on a long leather thong, wore a white suède maxi-coat, and her face was set in a silver fox collar. The lashes were lightly brushed with mascara, the full, pouty mouth carefully prepared with lipstick that appeared moist and fresh. The coat could not totally obscure her full, vigorous body, which seemed to have a will of its own.

Their names were Paul and Jeanne. For her, the smell of the Seine and the reflection of sunlight in the leaded bow windows of houses along the quay, the electrical flash beneath the belly of the Metro train and the appreciative glances of the men passing were an affirmation of her own existence. For him, these things meant nothing, even if observed, except that they were random manifestations of the physical world he detested.

She saw him first, and did not look away when he turned his distracted but unwavering eyes on hers—something happened in that first exchange. A man she assumed to be a derelict became suddenly remarkable, perhaps because of the tears and the contradictory impression of suppressed violence. He saw only an object, one more sensually pleasing than most, but still an object, tossed into the path of his own absurd wanderings.

Jeanne had the fleeting impulse to touch his moist, unshaven cheeks, Paul was surprised by a tug of lust, and wondered if the sensation could represent reality. For several

seconds they walked abreast, locked in step, their expressions revealing nothing more than vague interest, then she moved ahead, as if he were an anchor attached to her by an invisible but irresistible thread. She reached the end of the bridge, and passed out of the lush, *fin-de-siècle* ambience and into a harsh, contemporary world, where automobile horns could not be construed as music, the blueness of the sky was too pure and too abrupt, and that irresistible thread snapped—or grew limp—and was momentarily forgotten.

She passed the Café Viaduc, on the Rue Jules Verne. The street was deserted, although it was morning rush hour and Paris was vibrant with traffic. She walked up the street until she reached a towering iron gate backed by opaque yellow glass. A hand-written sign taped above the bell read APARTMENT FOR RENT FIFTH FLOOR. Jeanne stepped back, squinted up at the ornate balconies layered against the sky. She had discovered the apartment building by chance, and she wondered what sort of flat would be available behind the squat, thick, sensuous pillars, and the half-drawn shutters that gave the windows the look of somnolent, lecherous eyes. Jeanne had a fiancé, and they had spoken often of setting up house together—though these discussions were always general, almost academic—and it occurred to her that this might be the apartment to transform speculation into actuality.

She heard footsteps, and glanced once behind her, but the street remained empty. She walked back to the café. Workmen in overalls hunched over the polished aluminium bar, sipping strong coffee and cheap cognac before beginning their tasks. They appraised Jeanne as she swung through the door—the way men always did—but she ignored them, and hurried down the stairs to the telephone.

The light in the booth burned at the end of the corridor. Before she could reach it, the door to the men's room opened, and Paul stepped out. She was surprised to see him, and oddly frightened, and she pressed her back against the wall to let him pass. He looked at her, was secretly gratified by their

close proximity and the coincidence of the meeting. He felt the same basic, lustful impulse, didn't bother to examine the subtler aspects of her face and her clothes, any more than he had when he chanced to observe her on the walkway under the bridge. It seemed supremely ironic that he should be distracted in his grief by something so banal as a pretty girl. He decided to let the occasion lead where it would.

He passed her without so much as a smile of recognition, and left the café.

Jeanne was vaguely disturbed by the meeting. The inexplicable attraction she felt on the bridge had recurred, and she found it oddly humiliating. She stepped into the booth, inserted her *jeton*, and dialled, without bothering to close the door.

'Mamma,' she said, 'this is Jeanne. There's an apartment in Passy I'm going to see. Then I go to meet Tom at the station. See you later. Kisses, so long.'

She hung up, and climbed the stairs. Outside, the street seemed too bright for winter, preserved in an aura of timelessness. A sleek black Citroën eased past, but it was an exception. Empty scaffolding seemed to support one of the elegant old buildings in the middle of the block. She paused for a moment on the pavement, and felt the fresh flowers pinned to the crown of her hat, she was pleasantly aware that the men in the bar were watching her as she turned and sauntered back towards the apartment building.

She rang the bell, and pushed open the heavy iron door. Behind the opaque yellow glass was a dimly lit foyer thick with the smells of Gauloise cigarettes and something vaguely unpleasant bubbling on a stove somewhere upstairs. Light filtering through high, unwashed windows illuminated the elaborately wrought cage of the elevator. Panels of more opaque yellow glass separated the entrance hall from the concierge's office, and Jeanne stepped up to the tiny open window.

An obese black woman sat facing the opposite wall,

apparently reading a newspaper Jeanne cleared her throat, to get the woman's attention, but she remained motionless and uninterested

'I've come about the apartment,' Jeanne said, finally 'I saw the sign'

The concierge turned her head, and Jeanne saw that she had cataracts on both eyes

'The sign?' the woman said, staring off hostilely towards a corner of her cubicle 'Well, nobody tells me nothing'

She began to hum—a tuneless utterance that sounded more like keening—and turned away again

'I'd like to see it,' Jeanne said

'You want to rent it?'

'I don't know yet'

The woman heaved herself to her feet with what seemed like a tremendous effort She began a litany of complaints

'They rent They sublet They do what they want And I'm the last person to know about it Do you have a cigarette?'

Jeanne hoisted up her bag, took out a packet of Gitanes and passed them through the window The concierge extracted a cigarette, after Jeanne quickly drew her hand away, reluctant for the woman to touch her She lit her cigarette carefully, tilting her massive head in an effort to see the tip, and inhaled deeply

Instead of handing the packet back, she dropped it into the pocket of her tattered sweater

'Didn't used to be like that,' she said 'Go up, if you want to But you'll have to go alone I'm afraid of the rats'

Her voice was immensely old It was as if Jeanne was attempting to gain entrance to some shadowy and threatening netherworld, and the gatekeeper was bent on preventing her This old woman, like Charon at the gates of Hades, demanded payment before admitting suppliants, Jeanne wondered if she would disappear in the depths of the building

The concierge fumbled with the big keys crowding the board above her chair.

'Key's disappeared,' she croaked 'Some funny things going on around here'

The door next to the elevator cage opened with a creak Jeanne saw an emaciated, lined hand emerge, gripping an empty bottle, and set it down clumsily on the tiles The hand disappeared, and the door sighed shut

'They guzzle six bottles a day,' the woman said absently, as if the tenants were animals instead of people

Jeanne turned to leave The seediness of the building bothered her, but not as much as the sense of isolation—the feeling of being caught in a place out of time, where there were no real people doing the things real people did, just the deformed and the almost-dead

'Wait,' the concierge called 'Don't go away There's bound to be a duplicate'

She rummaged through a drawer, produced an old brass key

'There it is,' she said, and handed it to Jeanne, who recoiled from her soft, pudgy touch But before she could withdraw her hand, the woman grabbed it in her own, and squeezed An imbecilic smile revealed her dark, carious teeth

'You're young,' she cackled, rubbing her fingers over Jeanne's hand and wrist

She jerked her hand away, and walked to the elevator The woman was still cackling as Jeanne slammed the door of the cage and listened to the sigh of the old motor as she began to ascend The building reminded her of a mausoleum, grand in concept and construction, whose occupants could never be equal to its majesty, and allowed it to go into decline There was no sound other than that of the old elevator, and the clash of the gate as she stepped out on the fifth floor.

The apartment door was broad and heavy, the laquered wood almost black in the shadow of the elevator shaft The grooved brass knob was shiny with the touch of many hands Jeanne unlocked the door, and let it swing open into the entrance hall Immediately she was struck by the apartment's

expansiveness and grace Black and white tiles covered the floor of the hall, the panelling was in the same dark, sumptuous wood as that of the door She moved respectfully—almost fearfully—into the corridor She could see the beautiful detail of the parquet floor in the living room, and the soft yellow walls the texture of old parchment The tall, curved panes of the bow windows, unwashed for a long time, diffused the sunlight that filled the room with the glow of burnt gold The room was a perfect circle The egg-and-dart motif of the moulding was broken just above the windows, a neat space of no more than a metre, where the plaster had fallen years before Water marks scored the soft golden walls, and massive rectangular and oval paintings, since removed, had left dark impressions like the shadows of departed tenants The ambience was of elegant decline, rich and slightly decadent Jeanne was both attracted by the sensual extravagance of the flat, and repelled by the feeling of decay, and the almost imperceptible odour of mustiness, which she associated with death

She stepped into the circular living room, and swept off her hat She shook free her thick, auburn hair that had been captive, unbuttoned her coat, and performed a pirouette in the middle of the floor, but slowly, eyes and hands raised in appreciation The light from the half-shuttered windows dazzled her, the shadows seemed to creep closer

Suddenly she saw him He was perched on the radiator, his head resting on his knees She screamed, and bit her fist He didn't move

'Who are you?' she gasped She struggled to gain her composure, and backed slowly towards the door

'You frightened me,' she said, as calmly as possible Then she recognized that he was the man from the bridge 'How did you get in?'

'By the door'

His voice was deep and vibrant He spoke French with a foreign accent, with harshness and apparent contempt for the language

Jeanne stood in the entrance to the corridor. Paul had not left his perch, all she had to do was turn and leave, but for some reason she hesitated

'I'm such a fool,' she said 'I left the door open But I didn't hear you come in'

'I was already here'

She turned and looked at his profile again he seemed both sad and arrogant, and Jeanne's curiosity was aroused

'I beg your pardon,' she said

Paul's silhouette lengthened and broadened His massive shoulders seemed fitted to the room's generous proportions, and he moved across the floor with a kind of heavy grace His eyes were intelligent, very intense, and he looked at her mockingly, holding another key up, clamped between thick fingers

'Ah, the key,' she said 'So you're the one who took it'

'She gave it to me,' he corrected, still mocking her Her obvious anxiety seemed petty to him, almost laughable It made little difference to him whether she believed him or not, whether she stayed or whether she left, but he found her confusion amusing

'I had to bribe the concierge,' Jeanne said, and was surprised at her willingness to make conversation Why didn't she just walk away from this strange man, who wept on the bridge and then hovered in the shadows of an empty flat? She wondered if he were insane

'You have an American accent,' she told him, as if perhaps he hadn't been aware of the fact, then she felt foolish

Paul decided to ignore her. He turned and paced regally about the room, inspecting the floors where the wax had long since worn away and the peeling walls with an air of authority, he seemed as vain as he was strong

'These old buildings fascinate me,' said Jeanne

'They're not too expensive for renting,' he said condescendingly, and ran one finger along the mantelpiece He paused, and stared at the dust collected there, remembering the shock

of seeing his dead wife, the way he had fled from their hotel after the police arrived, the look of fear on the faces of the other tenants. He couldn't remember what had happened then. The face of the girl on the bridge seemed to bring his grief into focus, for she was so alive.

'An armchair would look good near the fireplace,' Jeanne said.

'No,' he contradicted. 'The armchair has to go in front of the window.'

She kept herself at a distance from him, though she would have liked to look at him more closely, to inspect his clothes and the pale grey eyes almost hidden beneath a haughty, overriding brow. She could not understand why she welcomed his rebukes, and felt a strong desire to soften him.

They continued to inspect the room, and then moved into adjoining chambers, each committed to the pretence that they were interested in the flat itself, rather than in their unlikely meeting and the promise—or the threat—of its conclusion. They passed ceremoniously into the dining room, he a few paces behind her. Stacks of bound and yellowed newspapers lined one wall, an old bureau rested on three legs, and a jumble of broken crates and chairs and other furniture loomed beneath a filthy sheet.

Paul attempted to balance the old bureau, and became pre-occupied with obtaining an unsteady equilibrium, while he waited for the girl's reaction. He sensed her attraction and her fear, and decided that he would do absolutely nothing to assist her. It made no difference to Paul what happened, for he saw himself and her as two ridiculous bodies, without motive or consequence.

He closed his eyes, stifled the memory of the night before. When he opened them again, he saw that Jeanne had opened her coat, revealing a brief yellow skirt and legs that seemed abnormally long, lost in the embrace of soft, calfskin boots. Her thighs seemed slightly fuller just below the edge of the mini-skirt than at the point where they converged. Her skin

was firm, and seemed to glow in the refracted light. Paul could see that her breasts were large, and without need of the support of a bra. Jeanne threw her shoulders back.

'Are you going to rent it?' she asked.

'What about you?'

'I don't know.'

Paul crossed the room to the windows. The tin and slate rooftops of Passy stretched away towards the river, a sea of crazy angular planes brushed a light blue-grey, the Eiffel Tower rose in the distance, spiny and erect, like a huge antenna draining energy from the sky. Both he and Jeanne stared at the tower, she impressed by its magnitude, and he by its pretension. Then Paul saw her reflection in the pane, and studied her body.

She was intensely aware of his eyes upon her, felt both embarrassment and a kind of elation, as if she enjoyed his small humiliations of her.

'I wonder who lived here,' she said. 'It's been empty for a long time.'

She stepped out into the corridor, and walked back towards the bathroom. She thought he would follow, but she heard his footsteps moving in the direction of the kitchen. Absently she inspected the bathroom, acutely aware of his movements at the far end of the apartment. The skylight over the tub bathed the room in light. The fittings of the double antique sinks matched the frame of the oval mirror. Jeanne paused to pat her hair, and to glance at her make-up in the mirror. Then, in a sudden daring moment, she pulled down her pants, raised her coat and skirt, and sat on the toilet. She knew it was an outrageous thing to do without locking or even closing the door, that he might walk into the room at any moment, and yet that possibility exhilarated her. She was terrified that he might find her there, and at the same time hoped that he would.

Paul leaned against the wall in the kitchen, and looked up at the pipes. The sound of the toilet flushing in the bathroom

distracted him. Jeanne entered the kitchen, and they avoided each other's eyes, passing one another and entering separate rooms. Both realized that by prolonging the inspection, they increased the possibility of some confrontation. Neither of them actively wanted or sought this confrontation, and yet neither was willing to break out of the pattern of movement that might bring them together again, as if they had been choreographed and were reluctant to shatter the mood of the piece, or the aura of timelessness contained within those walls.

The ring of a telephone was an unwelcome intrusion. Jeanne picked up the receiver in the bedroom, at the same time as Paul answered the phone in the dining room. The strange voice of the caller trailed off, and he hung up, but Paul and Jeanne continued to listen, each intent on the other's breathing. She wished that he would speak to her, that he would make some small concession—some show of weakness—so that then she might be able just to stand up and leave. Jeanne could not even hang up the phone, though she longed to slam it down on the ornate, antique carriage. It was his unyielding arrogance that held her. Perhaps Paul suspected this, for he was proud of his power.

He quietly placed the receiver on the floor, stood and walked quickly across the circular living room and into the corridor. He could see her kneeling on the floor, her back to him, still listening. In the sunlight her hair shone bright orange, as if it were burning, she held her coat back with her other hand, and for a moment he studied the taut muscles of her thighs.

He moved quietly forward, and he glimpsed the expression of a child in anticipation, as Jeanne unconsciously ran the tip of her tongue across her lip. Then she saw him. She quickly hung up, in confusion and exasperation, she couldn't look at him. In that moment she both feared and hated him.

'Well, have you decided?' she asked, and she couldn't hide the resentment in her voice. 'Are you renting it?'

'Yes It was already decided '

His power had been affirmed, and he relented towards the girl He decided he would be honest, no matter what

'Now I don't know,' he said 'Do you like it?'

He took her hand, to help her stand Her fingers were cool, smooth and yielding, encircling his own, she felt the potential strength in his broad palm, and in the fingers once calloused in some long manual labour It was the first time they had touched, and their hands lingered She had never felt so vulnerable

'Do you like it?' he repeated, as their hands fell apart 'The apartment?'

'I have to think about it,' she put her anxiety into the words it was difficult to think about anything

'Think fast,' he said, using a slang expression that, in his mouth, sounded like a threat

He left her Jeanne heard the sounds of his footsteps in the corridor, the slamming of the front door, then nothing but her own breathing A car horn blew briefly two blocks away, followed by complete silence He's gone, she decided, and she felt suddenly drained She picked up her hat from the floor, and walked back through to the living room on the way out, deep in thought

Paul was waiting for her He seemed even bigger in the direct light of the sun, his chin raised and eyes veiled by half-closed lids His arms were crossed on his chest, his overcoat hung open, revealing a thick, muscular torso and legs

Jeanne said, 'I thought you left '

'I locked the door ' He walked slowly towards her, watching her wide, liquid-blue eyes which reflected more resignation than fear 'Was I wrong?'

'No, no,' she said 'I just thought you were gone '

Paul took her face in his hands, and kissed her full on the lips In confusion, she dropped her hat and her bag, and placed her hands on his broad shoulders For a moment they stood absolutely still Nothing in the circular room moved except

the dust motes drifting in the sunlight, no sound reached them, but that of their own laboured breath. They seemed suspended in time, as did the faded beauty of the room, isolated from the world and their own separate lives. The room warmed and contained them in this brief, silent courtship.

Suddenly Paul swept her up in his arms, and carried her across to the wall by the window, as effortlessly as if she were a baby. She put her arms around his neck, which felt as solid as a stump, caressed the muscles of his back beneath the smooth material of his coat. He had about him a slightly musty odour that was part sweat and something else she could not identify, which was more masculine than that of any young man she had ever known, and it greatly excited her. He set her down, but his powerful hands did not release her, pulling her to him and hefting her pendulous breasts through the material of her dress. This he unbuttoned with speed and adeptness, and slipped both hands inside, cradling her, he outlined her nipples with his thumbs. The toughness of his skin aroused her, and she thrust against him.

As if by prearrangement, they began to tear at each other's clothes. She gripped him through his trousers, Paul reached beneath her skirt, gathered the top of her tights in his fist, and tore them away. Jeanne gasped at his audacity, clung to him in fear and anticipation. He eased one hand between her legs, and lifted her almost off the ground, with the other he wrenched open his pants. Grasping her buttocks in both hands, he lifted her to him, and impaled her.

They clawed at one another like animals. Jeanne climbed the trunk of his body, gripping his hips with her knees, clinging to his neck like a lost child. He pressed her against the wall, and drove deeper into her, for a moment they struggled awkwardly, as if in combat, but soon reached accord, and began to labour in concert. Their bodies advanced and retreated like components in the most intimate of dances. The rhythm grew more frenzied, the music and the world for-

gotten, and they heaved and gasped, and beat themselves against the wall protecting that passion, and slipped beyond the origins of their own endeavour, dying gradually and without remorse on the tattered orange rug

They lay motionless on the floor, without touching, their breathing gradually subsiding. Then Jeanne rolled away from him, cradled her head on her arm, looked up at the sky. Minutes passed, and neither spoke.

They stood and rearranged their clothes, their backs to each other. Jeanne set her hat at the same angle as before, and preceded him down the corridor and out on to the landing. Paul locked the door behind them, Jeanne buzzed for the elevator, and turned modestly away from Paul. Minutes before, they had shared the most carnal embrace and now, beyond the confines of the apartment, they were distant and embarrassed.

She was grateful when Paul turned and walked down the stairs, instead of joining her in the elevator. But they could not avoid meeting again in the foyer. She wondered what he might do next, walking just behind her as they passed the concierge's window, closed tight, and approached the door.

She preceded him into the street. The sunlight dazzled them, and the sounds of Paris rang discordantly. Paul tore the hand-written FOR RENT sign from the door, crushed it, and tossed it into the gutter. For a moment they hesitated, then they turned in opposite directions, and neither of them looked back.

CHAPTER TWO

IT HAD HAPPENED so abruptly, it could have been rape, except Jeanne knew differently. She could still smell him, and feel the solidity of his body, but she experienced only exhilaration and bemused disbelief. It seemed incongruous that she could

open herself completely to a total stranger, gladly receiving his semen and his violence, and then afterwards go to meet another man whom she professed to love, and tell him nothing. The contradiction appealed to her.

The Gare St Lazare was crowded. The vast dome resounded with the blasts of steam under pressure, and the ragged echo of a thousand feet shuffling along the railway platforms. All about her was movement and noise—a harsh reality—where earlier she had experienced a kind of suspension in time, and the fulfilment of a romantic fantasy.

Jeanne purchased a pass at the ticket window, and started down the platform. She moved against the force of the crowd, expecting to see Tom's face. She wondered if she might somehow appear changed to him. Friends often spoke of his superior perception. That worried her slightly, though it seemed that in the enormous crowd she was safe with her secret.

She stood on tip-toe, trying to spot Tom, and failed to notice that a young man in a denim jacket had crept up behind her and started filming with a black, hand-held Arriflex camera. Next to the cameraman squatted a gaunt figure wearing headphones and carrying a Nagra tape recorder attached to a strap over his shoulder. He held a shotgun microphone in one hand, and he directed the tip of it first in one direction, then in another, picking up background noise. A script girl hovered behind both of them, gripping a sheaf of papers. Other passengers and those waiting for them paused to stare at the film crew, but Jeanne, looking for Tom, was oblivious of their presence. Finally she spotted him. He wore a short leather jacket with a fur collar, a bright green and yellow neck scarf, and flared trousers. He looked younger than his twenty-five years, his dark hair carefully combed and trimmed, his gait bouncy and uninhibited, his smile as open and as innocent as a little boy's.

Jeanne pushed her way through the crowd, and threw herself into his arms. For a moment his embrace seemed tentative,

even brotherly, compared with the unyielding trap of Paul's arms and shoulders. Just then the train beside them edged backward, with a hiss of steam. As she pivoted to avoid the blast she caught sight of the camera crew.

Surprised, she pulled back from Tom. 'Do they take us for someone else, or what?' she asked, obviously annoyed.

Tom confronted the camera with a proud smile. He was first and last a film-maker, a worthy student of Truffaut and Godard, and at the heart of his documentary method—*cinéma vérité* the French called it—was a devotion to spontaneity and concealment even to the point of deception. Truth, for Tom, existed within the confines of sixteen millimetres of celluloid, screened at twenty-four frames a second. He was a sophisticated *voyeur*, who preferred to embrace life through the lens of a camera. In that way, he was the very antithesis of Paul.

'This is cinema,' he said, 'and that is my crew. We're making a film.'

He lightly brushed Jeanne's lips with his own. There was something mischievous in the gesture.

'If I kiss you, that might be cinema.'

He touched her hair.

'If I caress you, *that* might be cinema.'

Inspired, he began to ascend the tenuous structure of his own vision. Jeanne pulled him back to earth.

'Stop it!' she demanded, waving her arms and expecting the camera crew to disappear.

'I know them,' Tom protested. 'I told you.'

As if that answer was sufficient, Tom picked up his suitcase and escorted Jeanne towards the end of the platform. The crew moved with them.

'Look,' he said, 'I'm shooting a film for television. It's called "Portrait of a Girl", and the girl is you.'

'You should have asked my permission.'

The soundman crept forward, thrusting the microphone towards Jeanne.

'Yes,' Tom said, though he was disappointed that she failed to appreciate his inventiveness 'I suppose it amuses me to begin with the girl of the portrait arriving at the station to meet her fiancé'

'And so you kiss me, knowing it's a film Coward!'

In his preoccupation with film-making, Tom simply interpreted her anger as proof of her ingenuousness Gently, he stroked her cheek

'Most of all it's a love story,' he said 'You'll see'

The camera kept rolling

'Now tell me, Jeanne,' Tom went on, 'what did you do while I was away?'

Without giving it a second thought, she said, 'I thought about you night and day, and I cried, "Darling, I can't live without you!"'

The moment was electric As sarcasm is lost on fools and children, so too was it lost on Tom For him, Jeanne had at last assumed the role he envisioned for her, and he was radiant Her performance thrilled him

'*Magnifique*' he shouted, gesturing to the cameraman 'That was perfect Cut!'

CHAPTER THREE

NOT FAR FROM the Gare St Lazare, on a narrow back street still paved with cobblestones, where two cars passed each other with difficulty and a visitor would be as likely to hear Italian or English spoken as he would French, stood several *pensions* that catered for travellers These little hotels had their complement of regular tenants—faded intellectuals and painters, failed actors, the occasional prostitute—and filled their other rooms with visitors, and members of the seedier *demi-monde* of Paris, including army deserters, drug addicts, pimps and

petty criminals. A tenuous bond existed among all these disparate types, since they all shared some degree of failure, and a common locale. The smell of garbage and old wine gone to vinegar, the clatter of the Metro at the near-by elevated station of Bir Hakeim and the raucous noise from the corner bar, the proximity of furtive, illegal behaviour, these were common to most residents on the street, as were hard, narrow beds, one barely respectable meal a day, and the desire for clear weather.

Paul had lived on the street for five years, in just such a *pension*, owned by the woman he had married. Her suicide meant the little hotel was now his, though the prospect held little joy for him, since he despised the hotel and everything it represented.

For several hours after returning from the Rue Jules Verne, he put off visiting the room where his wife had killed herself. But by lunchtime, the maid had not yet come down, and Paul, curious, climbed the worn carpet covering the stairs. The wail of a saxophone carried throughout the hotel, emanating from a room on the far side of the courtyard where a black Algerian and his wife lived in relative contentment. The Algerian, a self-taught musician, played the horn at all hours, but Paul had never asked him to stop, not because he enjoyed the music, but because it seemed no more objectionable than street sounds and the complaints of his tenants. The sound of it was both sensual, and immensely sad. It also seemed quite futile to Paul.

On the third floor, Paul pushed open one of the anonymous doors, and immediately confronted what looked like the scene of a massacre. Blood seemed to be everywhere—it had been splattered across the tiles of the bath area, streaked the shower curtain trailing over the edge of the tub, and freckled the mirror over the sink. It looked as if several people could have been bludgeoned to death there, such was the bloody violence the room conveyed.

Paul was seized by nausea and anger. Without speaking, he crossed the room and stood at the window, waiting for the

maid to finish cleaning out the tub. He wanted to cry, but couldn't—he was numb.

He had no idea why his wife had done it, and that fact made his grief more absurd and more lonely. Perhaps there was no reason, except to baffle him.

The tap was turned full on. The maid dumped a bucket of diluted blood down the drain, then straightened and stared dumbly at Paul.

Paul gazed across the courtyard, and into the room where the Algerian continued to play his tenor sax. The man's cheeks were distended, and his muscular forearms bulged as he gripped the keys and raised the horn above his head. His wife knelt before him, patiently sewing a button on the front of his trousers. When she finished, she bit off the thread with her teeth, bringing her mouth unconsciously close to his groin. The simple intimacy of the act escaped Paul.

'I wanted to clean up,' the maid said, 'but the police wouldn't let me. They didn't believe in suicide—too much blood all over.'

She tossed the bloody rag into a corner, and picked up another. Then she knelt, and began to wipe the tiles.

'They had fun making me re-enact,' she said, and mimicked the cops' voices. "'She went there. She went here. She opened the curtain.' I did everything like her.' She paused to scrape at a bit of dried blood with her fingernail. 'The clients were awake all night, the hotel full of police. They played around with the blood. All spies!'

Paul looked around. The tarnished brass bedstead, the scarred wardrobe, the tattered screen decorated with Oriental versions of birds in flight—it was typical of every third-rate hotel in France, and yet Rosa had chosen the scene for her end. The room smelled of death even before her suicide.

The maid tossed her rag into a bucket half-filled with more diluted blood. She began to wash the shower curtain.

'They wanted to know if she was sad. If she was happy. If you fought, if you hit each other. And then when you were

married Why you didn't have children Pigs! They treated me like dirt.'

Her voice was empty of emotion Paul knew she and the other employees didn't like Rosa, because she took a genuine interest in their petty lives and they came to expect more than they deserved

The maid went on, 'Then they said, "Nervous type, your boss You know he was a boxer?" So? Then he was an actor, then a bongo player A revolutionary in Mexico, a journalist in Japan One day he debarks in Tahiti, wanders around, learns French'

It was a list of accomplishments that he had once been proud of but in the last few years had begun to view as meaningless Rosa might have changed all that

'Then he arrives in Paris' The maid continued her report 'And here he meets a woman with money, and marries her "Now what's your boss do? He's kept "' She shrugged, never looking up from her work 'And I say, "Can I clean up now?" And they say, "Don't touch anything You really think she killed herself?"'

She stood, and dried her hands on her apron

'And then he pushed me in a corner, trying to'

'Why don't you turn off the water?' Paul interrupted

She pushed greasy strands of hair from her forehead, leaned over and turned off the tap abruptly

'Now it's all right,' she said, surveying the room, as if she had done nothing more than clean up after some unruly guest 'You can't see anything'

Paul turned and stared at the large, empty suitcase lying on the bed It had contained Rosa's keepsakes, an odd collection of letters and photographs and little mementoes—even a priest's collar, which he could not explain All of it he had hidden from the police, not because he was afraid of them examining the contents, but because he wanted to deny them that pleasure The keepsakes had not given him any clues as to why Rosa killed herself, had not even seemed associated

with her. He thought he knew his wife, that he had finally established lasting contact with another human being, but he was wrong. Paul's life had been a succession of romantic indulgences in doomed affairs, all his commitments to others—as hazardous as they were—had amounted to zero. When he was a young man, it didn't seem to matter, but he had recently come to realize that he would not live for ever, and his death would be a solitary affair.

'What did they say about the suitcase?' he asked.

'They didn't believe it was empty. That's their tough luck.'

Casually the maid took an old-fashioned razor from the pocket of her apron, and handed it to Paul.

'Here's your razor,' she said.

'It's not mine.'

'They don't need it any more. The inquiry is over.'

Paul ran his thumb over the cold, blunt edge, and felt the smooth bone handle. It was the instrument Rosa had ended her life with, and he was not going to surrender it.

'They told me to return it to you,' she said, and watched for his reaction.

Paul dropped the razor into his jacket pocket.

'Put the suitcase away,' he told her.

She moved to obey him. 'There were so many slashes on her neck.'

Paul cut her short.

'They'll do an autopsy,' he said, and left the room.

The mood of the saxophonist had changed. The deep, sonorous melody was more sensual than melancholy, and Paul's thoughts turned to the girl and the events of the morning. The idea of sex without love, devoid of emotion, appealed to his morbid state of mind. It was a way to warm himself, however briefly, against the poverty of human desire, and the certainty of death. There had been extra furniture stored in the basement, and he had already arranged for its delivery. The idea of making certain conventional concessions appealed to him. By placing a few miserable sticks of furniture in the

apartment on the Rue Jules Verne, he would establish his presence

Paul went directly down the stairs of the hotel and out the door, barely pausing to pick up his overcoat. There was always the chance that the girl would not return to the apartment, but he never considered it.

CHAPTER FOUR

JEANNE ascended in the elevator, without really knowing why. The old contraption wheezed and sighed, and threatened never to make it to the fifth floor. One part of her wished it would return to the airless foyer, which was still empty and only offered a view of the mad concierge, sitting with her back to her tiny window, humming tunelessly. Jeanne had tried to convince herself that she really planned to rent the apartment, on the chance that the man she met there hadn't actually taken it.

But it wasn't the apartment she wanted now.

She rang the bell, then rang it again almost immediately. Nothing moved within that time-locked vault that she pictured in autumnal hues of muted red and gold. She gripped the key so tightly that her palm perspired.

A door opened on the floor above, followed by the sound of footsteps. Jeanne was seized by sudden, unreasonable panic. She didn't know what she feared more—being seen, or being chased from the threshold of her adventure. In a single, impetuous moment, she inserted the key in the lock, turned it, and pushed the door open. The apartment embraced her, she felt at home. Quickly she closed the door, without even glancing behind her.

Jeanne turned and faced the narrow corridor connecting the several rooms, and moved slowly forward. Everything was as

she remembered it. The sun had shifted, burnishing the opposing wall of the circular room. In the soft illumination, the water marks and cracks in the heavy wallpaper resembled the fine lines of a cardiograph. The excitement and the disbelief she experienced that morning returned. That visit left her primed—she couldn't stop thinking about it, even while she was being filmed by Tom. She didn't know what to expect next.

Something moved. Jeanne wheeled around, and saw in the corner next to the radiator a burly, yellow cat, crouched in the shadow, and watching her. She stamped her feet, and advanced on the cat, hissing as if she were truly its rival. She resented the animal's intrusion, and its blatant appraisal of her. The cat bounded up on to the window sill, and disappeared through the crack of the window left open. She pursued it even then, but found herself looking out over the rooftops, confronted by the distant, spiny thrust of the Eiffel Tower, mocking in its massive permanence. The klaxon of a police car carried over to her from the far side of the Seine, and subsided. Once again the apartment assumed the air of a haven.

'Allo!' a voice called from the corridor.

For a moment, the panic Jeanne felt earlier, returned. She raised the key, and held it before her like a shield.

She expected a stocky man in a camelhair overcoat. Instead, she saw the legs of an armchair emerge from the corridor, supported by a pair of human legs in faded blue overalls and worn shoes. The chair descended, revealing a workman in a battered beret. A Gauloise dangled from his lips.

'All right, lady,' he said with a thick Marseilles accent, 'where do I put it?'

Jeanne was too surprised to speak. He walked to the centre of the room without waiting for an answer, and set down the chair.

'You might have rung,' she said, feeling extremely foolish.

'The door was open.'

The workman detached the cigarette from his lips, and trailed smoke from each nostril. The tip was stained dark brown with his saliva. 'Can I put it here?' he asked, indicating the chair.

'No. In front of the fireplace,' Jeanne was emphatic.

He scowled, moved the chair, and stalked out of the room. Jeanne decided that she, too, would leave. But as she went to the door, she was confronted by a second mover, dragging another chair behind him.

'The chairs?' he asked her, and without waiting for an answer, he began to arrange them in the middle of the room.

The first mover returned with a table, which was circular and made of stained cherrywood, with a heavy scarred base. It didn't match the chairs—fake Windsors of some lighter wood, probably ash—and Jeanne wondered if the furniture belonged to the American. It seemed to Jeanne, who sold antiques, an odd lot for a man to assemble, though she could never have known that it was furniture taken from various rooms of an old hotel.

'What about the table?' the mover asked.

'I don't know,' Jeanne said, pretending that she belonged there. 'He'll decide.'

The intrusion of the movers spoiled Jeanne's mood. Now she was certain someone else had rented the apartment. Again she started for the corridor, intent upon leaving, again she was blocked, this time by the workmen struggling under the weight of a double mattress. They unloaded their burden in a diminutive room off the corridor, though the mattress protruded through the doorway.

She handed them each a five franc note as they left.

Now she was free to escape. But it was too late. The snap of the lock was sudden and harsh. She peered down the corridor, and saw Paul's broad back draped in the overcoat.

For the first time in her life, Jeanne experienced real terror. Her mind fluttered like a trapped bird. Why hadn't she left before, when she had her chance? Retreating, she threw her-

self into the stuffed armchair, and gathered her long legs in her arms in an attitude of submission. She listened to the sound of his approaching footsteps, and turned away so she wouldn't be facing him when he entered. She was prepared to show surprise, but he entered the room with barely a glance in her direction. Hands deep in his overcoat pockets, he strolled about appraising the furniture with an expression of mild disapproval.

He approached Jeanne's chair. She wanted to tell him about the key, that she had only come to return it, but she didn't want to be the first to speak. There was always a chance that he would make some indication that her presence was welcome.

But his first words were directive. 'The armchair has to go in front of the window.'

Before she could speak, he grasped the armrests, and with impressive strength, half lifted the chair with her still sitting in it, and propelled it across the room to the window. He stood back, and casually took off his overcoat, draping it over the back of another chair. He wore a soft grey houndstooth jacket and a turtleneck sweater that gave him an aura of youthfulness. He had shaved since the morning, and carefully brushed his hair. To Jeanne, he looked almost distinguished. She hoped his grooming was a tribute to her. Her fear diminished.

Defensively, she said, 'I came to return the key.'

He ignored her remark.

'Come help me,' he ordered.

His tone precluded any refusal. Jeanne stood up as if at attention, and slipped out of her coat, very much aware that she wore nothing beneath her skirt. She shook her head, and a mass of auburn curls tumbled about her shoulders. Her large breasts stood out hard against the sheer synthetic fabric of her dress.

Paul's concentration was elsewhere.

'You didn't waste any time moving your stuff in.' She

pointed to the key she had left on the table 'I came to return it to *you*'

'What do I care?'

He picked up a chair and handed it to her, looking at her for the first time

'Put the chairs around the table,' he instructed.

Jeanne shrugged, and obeyed. While it gave her a perverse pleasure to be ordered about by this strange man who respected none of the social amenities, it also annoyed her.

'I was going to throw the key away,' she said, without turning, and she ran her fingers down the smooth, stiff support of the chair back. It was grooved and circular at the top. With her index finger she slowly circled the grain of the wood, studying her own long, slender fingernail.

'But I couldn't throw it away,' she went on. 'What an idiot I am.'

It was a small confession, and one she was certain he would respond to. She was indicating her own apparent helplessness, and he would surely sympathize. After all, he too was human, even though there was an aura of potential violence about him.

Jeanne turned to confront him, and found that she was alone in the room.

'Listen, mister,' she called irritably, her disappointment matched only by her incredulousness. 'he really didn't care, and that was difficult for her to understand, after what had happened before. 'Where are you? I have to go.'

There was no answer. For a moment she thought that he had gone, but his overcoat was still there. The fear she experienced that morning returned.

She walked through the living room, searching for him, past the furniture shrouded in the sheet and out into the corridor.

He stood at the entrance to the small room, staring down at the protruding mattress, one hand resting on his hip, the other braced against the wall.

'The bed is too big for the room,' he said, as if that wasn't obvious

'I don't know what to call you,' Jeanne said

'I don't have a name'

It was an odd thing to say, Jeanne thought

'You want to know mine?' she asked

'No'

'It's'

She didn't even see the blow coming. He seemed merely to flip his wrist, but the force of the back of his hand striking her snapped her head to the side. Jeanne's mouth fell open, and her eyes were wide with surprise, anger and terror.

'I don't want to know your name,' he said staring, menacingly, straight at her. 'You don't have a name, and I don't have a name, either. No names here. Not one name!'

'You're crazy,' Jeanne whimpered, holding her hand to her cheek. She began to cry.

'Maybe I am. But I don't want to know anything about you. I don't want to know where you live, or where you come from. I want to know nothing. Nothing! You understand?' He was practically shouting.

'You scared me,' she said, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

'Nothing,' he repeated. He spoke softly now, and his eyes were fixed on hers. 'You and I are going to meet here, without knowing anything that goes on outside.' His voice was hypnotic.

'But why?' she asked, meekly.

Paul felt no pity for her. He approached, and placed one hand on her throat. The skin was soft and smooth, the muscles tight beneath.

'Because,' he said, 'we don't need names here. We're going to forget everything that we knew—all the people, all that we do, wherever we live. We're going to forget everything.'

She tried to imagine that.

'But I can't. Can you?'

'I don't know,' he admitted. 'Are you scared?'

She didn't answer. Slowly Paul began to work the buttons of her dress undone. He moved to kiss her, but Jeanne drew back.

No more now,' she said, her eyes lowered. 'Let me go.'

Paul gripped her arm. She was limp.

'Tomorrow,' she murmured. She raised and kissed his hand. 'Please, I'll want you more tomorrow.'

They stood staring into each other's eyes—the captor and the delicate prey—both uncertain of what would happen next.

'All right,' he said, finally. 'That's good. That way it won't become a habit.'

He bent his face towards hers, catching her hair in his hand, smelling her fragrance.

'Don't kiss me,' she said. 'If you kiss me, I won't be able to leave.'

'I'll walk you to the door.'

They moved down the corridor leisurely, as if reluctant to actually part. They were not touching now, but both were keenly aware of the other's body, of the closeness and the intriguing possibility. That was the bond between them. Paul opened the door for her, and Jeanne stepped out on to the landing.

She turned to say goodbye, but the heavy door had already closed.

CHAPTER FIVE

PAUL felt no elation after Jeanne left, only a bleak dominance. He expected nothing more, and he forgot even that by the time he had returned to his hotel, smelling the reality of rotten fish where a trash can had tumbled into the gutter of his street, and hearing screams that, at first, he thought were caused by pain, until he realized they came from an unattended baby. He wondered if Rosa had made any outcry in her final act, and

decided that she must have deserted him in silence, much the same way she had lived with him. That and the fact that she left him no explanation were further twists of the knife of discontent lodged in Paul's guts. Life in general was sordid and dirty, and a trial every harsh sound and minor irritation grated upon him, and sometimes he could barely restrain his savage impulse.

The foyer of the *pension* was deserted. Behind the small desk, which supported only the battered register—which Paul kept only because it was required by law, and not because he cared to know the names of any of his guests—the door to his room stood open. Someone was moving about there, and he carefully slipped out of his overcoat, dropped it on the desk, and slipped through the door. He would have welcomed some struggle, but he saw that it was his mother-in-law, a stolid, middle-aged woman wearing a plain black coat and hat with a veil. Her eyes were red, and rimmed with flesh that seemed bruised. A heavy application of powder couldn't totally disguise the unhealthy pallor of her skin. She stood before an open drawer of Paul's bureau, searching among Rosa's clothes with frantic hands.

He did not disturb her. Paul had mixed emotions about Mère—that was what she asked him to call her, and it seemed easy enough—and they were not all bad. She and her sycophantic husband belonged to the petty bourgeoisie he despised, but he knew she had loved her daughter, and that she had tried, unsuccessfully, to understand her. Paul thought he was the one who understood Rosa, and the fatuousness of that assumption, as it had been so violently revealed to him the night before, now made him more tolerant of Rosa's mother. After all, it was Mère's decision to leave them the hotel to run, but then that might have been less than a blessing. Perhaps they would have had a chance if they had left Paris.

She turned and saw him. For several seconds they hesitated, then they stepped quickly towards one another, and embraced. She felt very close to Paul, and he remembered the trips he and

Rosa used to take by train on Sundays, out to their cottage near Versailles. Mère always served ragout, or some other uninspired staple, and a local white wine that was dry and slightly effervescent, and left no after-effects.

'I took the five o'clock train,' she said. She looked up at him with tired, grieved eyes. 'Oh God, Paul!' she cried.

He could think of nothing to say to her, and dreaded her questions. Maybe she would realize the futility of questions. She turned and began to compulsively search among the scraps of paper, buttons and pins and other personal articles on the table next to Paul's bed.

'Papa's in bed with asthma,' she said. Neither she nor Paul were sorry that he hadn't come, since he had never approved of either Paul or Rosa, but lacked the courage to complain. 'The doctor wouldn't let him come. It's better like that. I'm stronger.'

She moved across to the wardrobe closet, and opened it without asking his permission. She searched among Rosa's dresses, and ran her hand along the top shelf. One by one she took down Rosa's handbags and piled them on the bed. She turned each one upside down, but discovered nothing except an old lipstick.

'What are you looking for?' Paul asked, his annoyance growing. Their mutual warmth might be shortlived, he suspected.

'Something that would explain it,' Mère said. 'A letter, a sign. It's not possible that my Rosa would leave nothing to her mother. Not even a word.'

She began to weep, with long, choking sobs. Paul gathered up the handbags and replaced them, and he shut the closet door. On top of the wardrobe rested the suitcase that had contained Rosa's mementoes, and he stared at it. There was no reason why she should see those things, since they explained nothing.

'I told you over the phone,' he said. 'She didn't leave anything. It's useless to keep looking.'

He picked up her suitcase, a large canvas valise that seemed too heavy for just a brief stay. He did not want her staying long in the hotel, for the sight of her reminded him of Rosa, and of all the problems left unsolved.

'You need to rest,' he told her, in a tone not to be contradicted. 'There are some rooms free upstairs.'

Paul led her towards the stairs. Mère noticed how worn the carpet was, and how it was pulling away from the runners at the back of each step, that the bulb of the brass lamp next to the desk was cracked, and that the clear borders of the frosted panes in the front door had not been washed in a year. The hotel also contained an odour she did not remember—like the smell of old Camembert—and she was doubly glad that her husband hadn't come with her.

They passed a black couple on the stairs. It was the Algerian who played the saxophone, and his wife, both wearing coats that were slightly too large, and both smiling with displays of white, healthy teeth. Paul nodded to them, but Mère paused on the step and watched them descend. No black people had ever been allowed in the place when she managed the hotel, and she looked up at Paul in amazement. He regarded her coolly, devoid of expression. He was not going to make it easy for her to complain, and he turned before she could speak, and continued the climb.

The doors all seemed in need of painting, and this made them seem more anonymous. From one came the sound of the maid running the vacuum cleaner. Paul pushed open the next one, and ushered Mère inside. A milk-glass pitcher sat on the tiny bureau, but there were no flowers. He set her valise in the middle of the bed, which sagged with the sigh of tired springs.

'With a razor?' Mère asked, and Paul winced. He knew the question would come, and yet he hadn't been prepared. To answer it was almost the equivalent of giving way to sickness.

'Yes,' he said, without passion.

'What time did it happen?'

Paul would explain once, he decided, and after that he would never speak of it again, no matter what

'I don't know,' he began 'I was on the night shift The last guest came back about one I closed up, and . '

He closed his eyes, saw the scene again—a small room washed in more blood than he would have thought possible Rosa slumped in the tub, forbidding and austere even in that gory death He had not been able to advance past the bed, not because he couldn't stand the sight, but because he was afraid of the razor and what he might do with it She might have prepared him—a gesture, a word beforehand, something to soften it, or make it comprehensible She could have arranged for the maid or the concierge, Raymond, to discover that horror Did she want him to suffer more, or didn't she care? Either way, it was devastating

'She killed herself during the evening,' he said, ending it 'And then?'

Her voice was like an echo no matter what he said, Paul knew there would be another question

'I already told you,' he said, suddenly very weary 'When I found her, I called an ambulance'

He walked back out into the hall before she could speak The room they were speaking of was directly across the hall, and Paul thought he heard water running in the tub He pressed his ear against the rough wood Mère had begun to unpack her bag, and didn't realize that he was gone

'After your phone call,' she said, 'we stayed up all night, talking about Rosa and you'

Paul wondered if the maid had left the water running She could have done it out of spite, or because she was afraid the blood would remain in the pipe She was very superstitious, and Paul wondered if she was still in that room

He returned to Mère's room

She was carefully laying out her belongings—toilet articles, a warm nightgown, a black dress for the funeral She looked at this approvingly

'Papa kept whispering,' she went on, 'as if the whole thing had happened in our house'

She looked up at him with a curious expression that he thought grotesque

'Where did it happen?' she asked

'In one of the rooms' Paul spoke with some contempt, pronouncing the word '*chambre*' as if the room were some grand salon 'What difference does it make?'

'Does anyone know if she suffered?'

How could she not have suffered? Paul thought And why did she do it?

'You'll have to ask the doctors' He added with malicious pleasure, 'They're doing an autopsy'

Her mouth opened in surprise Autopsies were associated with crime and disrepute, and she would not allow it

'No autopsy,' she said, pretending that she was in authority

Paul could stand no more questions He turned away, and crossed the hall to the other door He tried the handle, then abruptly swung the door open The room was empty, and as tidy as it was earlier Water gushed from the tap into the tub, and he crossed the room and shut it off He stared down at the clean enamel Perhaps he should bring Mère over and show her the setting of her daughter's suicide Perhaps that would satisfy her Paul twisted the tap tighter, but stopped before he broke it The room was so common, perhaps that was why Rosa chose it

Across the hall, Mère began to unpack bundles of cards and envelopes They were all lined in black, appropriate only for the announcement of death They were left over from the funerals of other relatives, and she prided herself on the knowledge and experience she had with such matters She would handle her daughter's last rites with efficiency, Rosa would lack nothing Paul worried her slightly She had always been afraid of him, and at the same time recognized his intense maleness He was so different from her own husband Once she thought that Paul was the only kind of man who could

manage Rosa, and for that reason she gave her blessing to Rosa's marriage to a soldier of fortune. It was her husband's phrase.

Paul stood in the doorway, looking down at the collection of cards and envelopes. Mère picked one up and examined it almost lovingly.

'I had them in the house,' she said, avoiding his eyes. 'I've been through death before. By now I think of everything. I'm going to make the room beautiful, with flowers everywhere.'

Paul clenched his fists. He couldn't take much more.

'Cards and relatives,' he said bitterly, 'flowers and funeral clothes—all in that suitcase. You haven't forgotten a thing, except one. I don't want any priests.'

That hadn't occurred to her, and a funeral without a priest was unthinkable.

'Religious,' she stammered. 'It's going to be a religious funeral.'

'Rosa wasn't a believer!'

His words resounded down the hall. Other doors opened as the guests began to listen. Rosa's suicide had left a pall over the entire hotel, and many of the guests moved furtively through the halls, afraid either of death or inconvenience. Paul wasn't sure which it was, and didn't care.

'Nobody around here is a believer,' he called, for the benefit of the others.

'Don't shout, Paul,' Mère said, moving fearfully backwards until the bed was between them.

Paul roared, 'The Church doesn't want suicides!'

It was absurd, and yet he felt agony and frustration. For a moment he thought he could have throttled her, but he turned on the door instead, and slammed it with first one and then the other massive fist, driving it hard against the wall. It trembled on the hinges, and a hush fell over the hotel.

'They'll absolve her,' Mère said, crying again in desperation. 'I'll see to it. We'll have a beautiful Mass.' Then she sat on the bed, covered her face with her hands. 'Do you know what

Papa said?' she sobbed, unable to hold back what she thought was the truth 'He said, "My little girl was always happy What did they do to her? Why did she kill herself?"'

Paul wished that he too could cry, could do something to ease the pain But there was nothing he could do

'I don't know,' he said 'I'll never know'

Controlling his anger, he turned and stepped quickly out into the hall Most of the doors closed quickly, as the guests tried to hide the fact that they were listening, and a few doors remained slightly open Paul thought of the people behind them as worms, and he wanted to provoke them, though he knew they all lacked the courage to challenge him Their lives were as pointless as his own, and as contemptible

With false composure, he walked down the corridor, grasped the handle of every open door, and slammed it shut

CHAPTER SIX

IN PARIS there are winter days when the breeze seems to carry all the way up from the Côte d'Azur, the sycamore trees look a little less bare against a blemishless sky, and a weak sun manages to coax the smell of life from a cold earth It is too early even for a false spring, yet a promise hangs in the air The colour for which the city is famous stretches overhead—a Paris blue—augmented by the reds and yellows of the café awnings, the textured grey stone and the dun-coloured expanse of the Seine

Although Paul had slept badly, sitting up in an armchair most of the night, the unusually balmy air revived him Jeanne had resolved before falling into a dreamless sleep that she would never see him again, but that resolution weakened when she confronted the bright new day, and died even before she drank her morning coffee. The two of them arrived at the

apartment on the Rue Jules Verne almost simultaneously. They stripped in the small room, and fell on to the mattress locked in an embrace. The promise of the previous day had been fulfilled. Their abstinence increased their excitement. She clutched him with her arms and legs, as if seeking some protection from their heightened passion.

For a long time afterwards they lay side by side, without touching, waiting for some sound to penetrate the walls washed golden red in the morning sunlight. None did. The apartment contained them like a womb.

Jeanne's hair spread out like a sunburst on the ticking of the mattress, wild and abundant. Her breasts, even in repose, were firm, combining the fullness of a mature, sensual woman and the resiliency of an adolescent. Her nipples were large and dark, her skin clear and almost radiant. Her hips were as narrow as a boy's, and complemented her ample female sensuality.

Paul's body seemed merely vast in comparison with hers, and lacking in definition. He sprawled beside her like an indulgent god. His arms and chest were still powerful, and covered with hair untouched by greyness, but he was beginning to lose his muscle tone, his body did not match the austerity of his face, with its aquiline planes and lingering, fierce vitality. He seemed caught in an abrupt transition between youth and old age.

Paul was aware of Jeanne's body only in the most superficial way, since he thought of her as little more than that body, which housed his random passion, paid compliments to his vanity and his sexual acumen, and isolated him momentarily from his despair. Her voluptuousness he would have noticed only if the manifestations of it were missing. Jeanne also took his body for granted, but in an entirely different way. His initial assault upon her had been based upon a general, overwhelming masculine power, and it was in terms of force that she still saw and felt him. She didn't really see his body, though his presence was massive. The love she began to feel

for him was based upon this power, and reinforced by his insistence upon secrecy—and therefore mystery

Jeanne raised herself to her knees, and pulled on her pants 'I like sex,' she said, 'because it's healthy exercise. It keeps your body in shape, and it gives you a great appetite'

She walked out of the room without looking down at him, and went into the bathroom. In the mirror she saw a tousle-headed girl with high, wide cheekbones and lips raised in a perpetual pout and breasts that sometimes felt almost cumbersome. Her face reflected an incongruous mixture of shallowness and wisdom. Jeanne felt a sudden chill. Though the glass above the tub flooded the room with light, the turquoise and white tiles reflected only the crisp reality of winter. The day had grown cold. Her body seemed exposed, and devoid of all warmth, and she slammed the door behind her, as if that were some protection.

Paul gathered up his clothes. He padded down the corridor on his bare feet, bound for the bathroom. The idea of washing themselves and dressing in each other's presence appealed to him, since he was determined to respect no conventions. The closed door made him pause. He considered walking directly in on her—Jeanne was at that point precariously balanced on the twin sinks, washing herself, her thighs gripping the cold stone because there was no bidet—but he preferred to be invited.

He rattled the doorknob.

'Leave me alone,' she called.

'Let me watch.'

'It's not very interesting.'

'That depends.' Her bourgeoisie inhibitions amused him, and he called out, 'You're washing yourself. I want to see.'

'No!' she said emphatically. It was so strange that she would surrender all pretensions of modesty in the act of sex, and assume them in the mundane aftermath.

She slipped gracefully from the edge of the sink, and shut off the water.

'I'm finished,' she said, as if he couldn't hear 'You can come in now'

Paul entered, ceremoniously cradling his clothes in one arm. He deposited them on the edge of the tub, and stepped naked to the sink, standing next to Jeanne. Her toilet articles were spread before her—mascara, lipstick, a small frosted bottle of cleansing cream—and she began to make up her face, pouting her lips, gazing sideways at her lashes, oblivious of Paul.

Paul was chuckling—a sound new to her—his hands resting on the edge of the sink.

'What's so funny?' she demanded.

'Nothing, really,' he said, but he continued to laugh. 'I was just picturing you perched on top of this sink. It takes practice to keep your balance, and wash yourself at the same time. If you fall, you could break a leg.'

Jeanne was furious, not because he was amused, but because he showed it. There were some things one didn't talk about. Colour rose to her cheeks, and she turned angrily back to the mirror.

Paul decided to humour her. He kissed her lightly on the shoulder, said, 'Now don't be like that.'

'We're different,' she said, without looking at him.

She glanced at him in the mirror, and saw that he was still mocking. Her reservations seemed so petty to him. They were, after all, just two bodies colliding in the abyss of the contemporary world, where one act was no more outrageous than another. Only the palpable heat of her flesh seemed real to him.

But he would still pamper her, for a time. 'Forgive me,' he entreated, and he kissed her again. 'Do you forgive me?'

Jeanne relented. 'Yes,' she said, and she smiled at him, conveying a child's spontaneous warmth.

Paul recognized the proper moment to move forward again, to push her farther.

'Then come here and wash me,' he said.

Her smile dissolved. 'Are you kidding?' she asked, in broken

English. 'Not on your life! What makes you think you can order me around like that?'

There was an edge to her voice—both anger and fear—but Paul ignored it. He turned on the water, and began to soap his hands, and then his penis. He straddled the basin.

'You don't know what you're missing,' he said.

Jeanne shook her head in disbelief. 'You know what you are?' she said. 'You're a pig.'

'A pig?' Paul considered that the idea was amusing.

'A toilet is a toilet,' she explained with mock condescension, 'and love is love. You mix up the sacred and the profane.'

For Paul there was no difference between the two words, and he determined to make her see that. But for the moment he was silent. Jeanne continued to apply her make-up.

Paul dried himself, conscious of a growing malaise. The scene smacked of domesticity: they dressed in respectful silence, preparing themselves for the outside world, like a man and wife already too familiar with each other's habits. The scene was too pleasant. Paul decided to change that.

'I once saw a very sad Swedish film that mixed up the sacred and the profane,' he began, sitting on the edge of the tub to put on his socks.

'All pornographic films are sad,' she said. 'They're death.'

'It wasn't pornography—it was just Swedish. It was called "Secret Stockholm"—the story of a very shy young guy who finally got up the courage to invite a girl to his house. So while he's waiting, all excited, all emotional, he begins to wonder if his feet are dirty. He checks. They're disgusting. So he runs into the bathroom to wash them. But there's no water. He's desperate, he doesn't know what to do. Suddenly he gets an inspiration. He puts his foot into the toilet, and flushes. The guy's face lights up—he's done it. But when he tries to take his foot out of the toilet, he can't. It's stuck. He tries again, he pulls it every which way, but no luck. The girl comes and finds him desperate, crying, leaning against the wall, with his foot in the toilet bowl.'

Paul seemed to take pleasure in the sadistic aspects of his story

He continued, "The guy tells the girl to go away, and to never come back. But she insists that she can't leave him like that, because he'll starve to death. She goes to get a plumber. The plumber studies the case, but doesn't want to take the responsibility. "I can't break the toilet," he says. "It might hurt his foot." They call an ambulance. The attendants arrive with a stretcher, and they all decide to unbolt the toilet from the floor. The boy is put on the stretcher, with the toilet still on his foot, like an enormous shoe. The two attendants begin to giggle. The first one slips down the stairs, falls under the stretcher. The toilet falls on his head and kills him instantly."

Jeanne laughed nervously. Paul stood up abruptly and walked out of the bathroom, leaving her alone. The cruel humour was something they could at least have shared, but he was unwilling.

Fully dressed now, Paul began to pace the circular living room, inspecting it with a clinical eye. He moved the table and chairs into the dining room, and dragged the heavy double mattress in from the small room. What had been the tabernacle isolating them from the outside world took on the aspects of an arena.

He raised the shutters on one of the windows slightly, to allow more light to enter the room.

Jeanne emerged from the bathroom, perfectly made-up and ready to leave. Her hair was brushed and shining, and carefully rolled and pinned high above the back of her neck. They looked at each other. Jeanne smiled, hesitated, gave a little wave, and turned towards the front door. But Paul wasn't through with her yet, and somehow she knew it. There was no need for him to call her back.

She returned to the living room. Paul stood in the sunlight, his chin raised, regarding her with the same cool detachment. She returned his gaze. They were now two combatants, taking each other's measure.

'Shall we begin again?' she asked

Paul didn't answer, but slowly began to unbutton his shirt. Jeanne tossed her coat and bag aside, and imitated him, stripping away her blouse and pants, finally standing naked and proud before him.

'We want to look at each other,' she said. 'Is that it?'

'Yes,' he said, and for the first time he looked at her as a woman. 'That's it.'

They sat on the bed, facing each other, and entwined their legs. He felt her face with both hands, as if he had just discovered it, her neck and shoulders, her breasts—where he lingered, marvelling at their fullness.

'Isn't it beautiful like this?' he said, believing it, 'without knowing anything.'

'Adam and Eve didn't know anything about each other,' she said.

'We're like them in reverse. They saw they were naked, and were ashamed. We saw that we had clothes on, and we came here to be naked.'

They entwined their legs in a seated position of the *Kama Sutra*, each of them with one thigh resting over the other's. Jeanne took his penis in her hand and guided him into her. Paul ran his fingers over her hips, and stroked the warm mound of her pubic hair.

'I think we could come without touching,' she said.

They leaned back on their arms, and regarded each other.

'With our eyes,' she said, 'and bodies.'

He asked jokingly, 'Did you come yet?'

'No.'

Paul rocked back and forth.

Jeanne moaned, 'It's difficult.'

'I didn't either, yet. You're not trying hard enough.'

Their movements quickened. Paul reached his climax first, and slipped away from her. But Jeanne had never been more content. For the first time they began to feel something besides lust and the excitement of an illicit affair—it was a kind of

liking She wanted to call him something, but didn't know what

'I know what I'll do,' she said brightly 'I shall have to invent a name for you '

'A name? Oh Jesus Christ!' Paul said, laughing and shaking his head 'Oh, God, I've been called that name a million times in my life I don't want a name I'm better off with a grunt or a groan Do you want to know my name?'

He raised himself on his hands and knees He formed his mouth into the shape of a snout, lifted his head and growled loudly Then he began to grunt, deep in his throat—a primal sound that excited them both Jeanne put her arms around his neck, and moved one foot up between his legs

'It's so masculine,' she said 'Now listen to mine '

She pulled him down next to her on the mattress, and held him tightly She mewed, and asked, 'Do you like it?'

They laughed He grunted again, and she answered Together they filled the circular room with the strident courtship of beasts

CHAPTER SEVEN

TOM'S CREW was waiting in the garden of the villa in Chatillon-sous-Bagneux, a Paris suburb, when Jeanne arrived Her hair was no longer up in a roll, but clustered in wild curls about her shoulders She looked as if she had just awakened Fresh from her tryst with Paul, she brimmed with life, in contrast, the others looked like statues, and she paused by the gate to watch the soundman He knelt by his Nagra, earphones clamped in place, and passed the shotgun mike back and forth above his head, recording the varied strident sounds of barnyard animals The cameraman loaded film into the Arriflex, both hands thrust into a black bag The script girl thumbed through the glossy pages of *Elle*, obviously bored None of

them was interested in the geese that waddled by the birds simply produced an interesting sound

Jeanne slammed the gate

'Thanks for the noise,' the soundman said 'That was discretion itself'

Jeanne saw the disappointment on Tom's face. He stood off to one side, his hands in his pockets, trying to smile at her

'You're not ready,' he said, gazing at her hair

She decided she wouldn't excuse herself by lying. 'But it's not a wig,' she joked. 'It's mine. Am I not beautiful?' Tell me you don't like the way I look'

'But I do like the way you look,' Tom insisted. 'You seem changed, but you're the same. I can already see a shot'

Tom raised both hands, and, in imitation of a camera, circled her. The crew prepared for the shot. Jeanne looked around at the garden and the encompassing stone wall. In her childhood, the villa had been surrounded on three sides by green fields, and it had seemed inviolate like all her memories. It was with disappointment that she had watched those same fields over the years become choked with concrete apartment buildings, and the shanty towns of impoverished immigrants forced out of the cities.

'The camera is high,' Tom went on. 'It slowly descends towards you. And as you advance, it moves in on you. There's music, too. It gets closer and closer to you'

'I'm in a hurry,' Jeanne interrupted. 'Let's begin'

'But first we'll talk about it a little'

'No,' she said

The crew scrambled into action, and followed her towards the back of the garden.

'Today we improvise,' she announced. 'You will just have to keep up'

Tom was delighted. He motioned to his cameraman to follow

'You're lovely,' he said, walking behind her, reaching just to touch her wild hair. 'It's the natural you, at home in your

childhood setting It couldn't be any other way! I'll film you as you were—wild, impetuous, ravishing!'

Jeanne led them to a small grave next to the hawthorn bush The photograph set in the tombstone showed her German shepherd dog sitting obediently Engraved beneath it were the words, 'Mustapha, Oran 1950—Paris 1958'

'He was my childhood friend,' she said 'He used to watch me for hours, and I thought he understood me'

An old woman wearing a black dress, arms crossed on heavy bosom, came hurrying towards them from the house Her white hair was pulled severely back, and she reached the group in time to hear what Jeanne said The woman added, 'Dogs are worth more than people Much more'

Jeanne jumped up and hugged her 'This is Olympia,' she explained to Tom 'My childhood nurse'

'Mustapha could always tell the rich from the poor,' Olympia said 'He never made a mistake If someone who was well-dressed came in, he never moved'

Her husky voice trailed off as she watched the cameraman, encouraged by Tom, begin to circle her

'If a beggar showed up,' she went on, 'you should have seen him What a dog! The Colonel trained him to recognize Arabs by their odour'

Jeanne turned to the crew 'Olympia is an anthology of domestic virtues She is faithful, admiring and racist'

The old woman led them into the villa

Potted plants crowded the entrance hall, haphazardly distributed over the worn tiles A faded rattan side table supported a brass lamp with a chimney of bottle-green glass, above it hung an amateur oil painting of Jeanne's father, the Colonel, in full dress His uniform was exquisitely cut, his boots unmarked, his moustache full and waxed

Jeanne led the crew past the picture, into an adjoining room with bare polished floors and walls hung with cloth printed in bold, geometric designs Primitive weapons neatly arranged above a shelf of photographs, the glut of exotic scenes yellow-

ing and curling at the edges, momentarily distracted the crew and their director

Jeanne watched them proudly. She took a frame from the shelf and held it up for their inspection, in the photograph three rows of elementary school girls confronted the camera dourly under the eye of a stalwart woman in walking shoes.

'That's me,' said Jeanne. 'To the right of the teacher, Mademoiselle Sauvage. She was very religious, very severe.'

'She was too good,' interrupted Olympia. 'She spoiled you.'

Tom slapped the cameraman on the shoulder, he swivelled, pointing the lens towards the old woman, but she ducked behind the others.

Jeanne pointed at another figure.

'And that's Christine, my best friend. She married a chemist and has two children. It's a little like a village here. Everybody knows everybody.'

Olympia croaked, 'Personally, I couldn't live in Paris. It's more human here.'

Again the cameraman pivoted, in search of a new quarry, Olympia retreated through the louvred doors.

'We're sheltered here,' Jeanne went on. 'It's melancholy to look behind you.'

They moved into her childhood room. Stuffed animals worn bare at the extremities were marshalled along the window sills, scarred wooden replicas of adult possessions—a wheelbarrow, a chair, a footstool—lined the walls. The book covers were all faded.

'Why is it melancholy?' Tom asked her. 'It's marvellous.'

She simply raised her hands, and turned around.

'It's you!' he cried. 'It's your childhood—everything I want!'

Tom gazed at the ceiling in inspiration. At the same time he motioned for the cameraman to follow Jeanne.

'These notebooks are the childhood of your intelligence. It's fascinating. The public is a little afraid of the woman of today.'

He paused to think, forming the script in his mind, while Jeanne danced out of the room, the cameraman in pursuit

‘But if you can show the daily intelligence of some woman or other, slightly above average, but not unattainable’

Inspired, Tom gazed around, and seemed to notice the crew members for the first time, lurking behind them

‘What are you doing there?’ he shouted ‘Who are all these zombies around us?’

He chased them outside, then opened a door leading into a room filled with low, comfortable furniture

‘I’m opening the door!’ he cried, beckoning to Jeanne ‘I’m opening all of the doors!’

‘Where are you going?’ she asked, trying to match his enthusiasm

‘I have a plan Reverse gear! Understand? Like a car put in reverse’

He took her by the hands

‘Close your eyes,’ he said ‘Back up, keep going, find your childhood again’

‘I see Papa,’ she said, co-operating, ‘in full dress uniform’

‘Don’t be afraid Overcome the obstacles’

‘Papa in Algiers’

‘You are fifteen,’ he said ‘Fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven, ten, nine’

‘I see my favourite street when I was eight’

She opened her eyes, and picked up a bound ledger lying on the table

She began to read aloud

“Homework for French class Theme the country Development the country is a land of cows The cow is entirely covered with leather It has four sides—the front, the back, the top, and the bottom ”

‘Charming!’

Jeanne picked up the dictionary, and began to leaf through it

'The source of my culture was the *Larousse*,' she said 'I copied from it'

She read in a loud, theatrical voice. "'Menstruation, feminine noun, physiological function consisting of flow . . . Penis, masculine noun, organ of copulation measuring from five to forty centimetres . . .'"

'Very instructive,' he said, turning towards the window and signalling for the crew to return

Jeanne took down a photograph of her father. She studied the array of medals on his chest, the gold braid of his dress uniform she remembered so vividly, the way he stood at attention with his fingers slightly curled at his sides. She had never seen him when he wasn't formal. He was always kind, and yet she had never felt completely free just to climb into his lap, to kiss and touch him. Her mother had worshipped the Colonel, and Jeanne had often detected what even then seemed to her to be jealousy on her mother's part. Jeanne had even wanted to be a soldier like the Colonel, to carry a weapon and move through life with his splendid assurance. She was so flattered when he offered to teach her to shoot his service pistol that she overcame her terror of the gun's roar and the potential death it dispensed, and learned to shoot almost as well as he. Jeanne thought of the Colonel as an old man, but an invincible one, and when he died it was as if the whole world was left in danger.

'Who is this?' asked Tom, holding up a pencil drawing of a young boy playing a piano.

Jeanne smiled.

'My first love,' she said. 'My cousin, Paul.'

The cameraman moved between them, focusing the Arriflex on the picture. Olympia stood in the doorway, massively silent.

'Why are his eyes closed?' the script girl asked.

'He was playing the piano, and he played magnificently. I remember him seated there, running his slender fingers over the keys. He practised for hours.'

She did remember her cousin's dark eyes and unhealthy, feverish stare. While his parents and hers drank tea in the sitting room, looking out at the blooming hyacinth and the hawthorn, talking of their travels in Africa, she and he slipped quietly away.

Jeanne opened the window and pointed towards the back yard. 'Those two trees,' she said, 'the chestnut and the plane tree, were where we used to sit. We each had our own tree, and we'd look at each other. My cousin seemed like a saint to me.'

She took Tom's hand, and led him out into the yard. 'Aren't they beautiful?' she said, and she pointed to a lot overgrown with weeds and bushes. But Jeanne didn't see this, for she was locked into a reverie of what had been, and she was looking up instead of at the decline all around her. 'Aren't they beautiful,' she said again, as if Tom couldn't see for himself. 'To me, those trees seemed like a real jungle.'

How easy it was to idealize for Tom. His enthusiasm and his disappointments encouraged her to indulge her own penchant for fantasy. But she couldn't go on. Reality seemed massing about her like storm clouds, and the more sordid aspects of her childhood threatened to be revealed.

Olympia came lumbering after them, holding up the photograph of her father like an icon. 'The Colonel was superb!' she called to anyone who would listen, trying to get the cameraman to focus on what she considered the most important facet of the villa. 'He even frightened me,' she admitted.

Jeanne looked at the photograph again, and remembered the fear she had often felt when he was displeased. Suddenly she was thinking of Paul, of his conceit and his strength, and for the first time the way the villa walls lacked paint, the erosion of one corner of the garden, the crumbling stone and weeds and the view of tar-paper shacks in the distance.

'None of that existed in my time,' she said with disgust, pushing her way into the thicket, the crew close behind her. She felt chastened and somehow cheated by her visit, and when

she saw half a dozen little dark-skinned boys squatting among the blackberry bushes, defecating, she became angry—as if she were being violated

‘What are you doing?’ she shouted at them, as they pulled up their pants, and fled

Jeanne grabbed one of the boys by the arm, and shook him. His clothes were little more than rags, and he trembled as he kicked at her shins. Jeanne saw Olympia pick up a broken board and come charging through the thicket, the cameraman galloping beside her and keeping her in focus.

‘Don’t you have any place besides my jungle to do this in?’ Jeanne asked the boy, and realized that he couldn’t understand her. ‘Run fast,’ she said. ‘Beat it!’

He was gone, scrambling over the wall like an animal.

‘If I catch you, I’ll hang you!’ screamed Olympia. ‘Go shit in your own country, you little bastard.’

Olympia picked up a stone, and hurled it futilely after the trespassers. ‘Africa,’ she said disgustedly. ‘You can’t even live at home any more.’

Jeanne turned and looked at the scene around her, and she said to herself, ‘Growing old is a crime.’

Tom caught up with her, breathing heavily, and he gestured towards the cameraman. His face was flushed with excitement and pride.

‘Did you get it?’ Jeanne asked.

‘All of it.’

‘Olympia was magnificent. Now you’ll have a precise idea of race relations in the suburbs.’

Jeanne realized that her eyes were moist.

Tom didn’t notice. ‘Now tell me about your father,’ he said.

‘I thought we were finished for the day.’

She turned away from him, and started for the front gate. Tom suddenly seemed bound up in her illusions of childhood, vain and naive.

‘One last thing,’ he said, hurrying to keep up with her.

‘I’m in a hurry.’

'Only five minutes, Jeanne,' and his voice sounded surprised and hurt 'What about the Colonel?'

'I have a business appointment,' she told him, lying easily. She went straight out of the gate and didn't bother to close it

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PROMISE of morning faded as a cover of clouds drew across the sun. It shone through them briefly, like a thin wafer, then darkened. Winter rain obscured the face of Paris, driven by the wind, and disintegrated against the tall, curved panes of the apartment windows. Pale, refracted light played over the living room walls, creating the illusion of running water. The room had begun to smell of sex.

They lay naked on the mattress, Jeanne's arm resting across Paul's broad chest, her face turned away from him. Paul held a bright silver harmonica in his hand, and he blew into it, producing only plaintive, disconnected notes.

'What a life,' she said, speaking as if in a dream. 'No time to rest.'

The morning was still with her, and the villa's entombed memories. She felt an unreasonable desire to share her disappointment with Paul.

'The Colonel,' she began, 'had green eyes and shiny boots. I loved him like a god. He was so handsome in his uniform.'

Without stirring, Paul said, 'What a steaming pile of horse shit.'

'What?' She felt outraged. 'I forbid you.'

'All uniforms are bullshit, everything outside this place is bullshit. Besides, I don't want to hear your stories about your past, and all that.'

She knew she was foolish to expect him to sympathize, but she went on, 'He died in 1958, in Algeria.'

'Or '68,' Paul said 'Or '28, or '98'

'In '58! And I forbid you to joke about that!'

'Listen,' he said patiently, 'why don't you stop talking about things that don't matter here? So what the hell's the difference?'

'So what do I have to say?' she asked wearily, seeking guidance 'What do I have to do?'

Paul smiled at her. He played a few bars of a childish tune on the harmonica, with feeling and skill, then he sang, 'Come on the good ship, Lolly-pop'

Jeanne just shook her head. His distance seemed vast.

'Why don't you go back to America?' she asked.

'I don't know. Bad memories, I guess.'

'Of what?'

'My father,' he said, rolling on to his stomach and raising himself on his elbows, so that his face was close to hers. 'He was a drunk, tough,' he stressed the word, 'a whore-fucker, bar fighter—super masculine. Yeah, he was tough.'

His face softened. 'My mother was very poetic, also a drunk, and my memories when I was a kid were of her being arrested in the nude. We lived in a small town in a farming community. I'd come home from school and she'd be gone—in jail or something.'

A barely perceptible expression of pleasure passed over his face, softening his features. It had been so long since he had thought of these things, that they had ceased to exist for him.

'I used to have to milk a cow,' he said, 'every morning and every night, and I liked that. But I remember one time I was all dressed up to go out and take this girl to a basketball game, and my father said, "You have to milk the cow." And I asked him, "Would you please milk it for me?" Know what he said? He said, "Get your ass out there!" So I went out, and I was in a hurry and I didn't have time to change my shoes, and I got cow-shit all over them. On the way to the basketball game, it smelled in the car.'

Paul grimaced.

'I don't know,' he said, trying to dismiss what he had already recalled 'I can't remember very many good things'

Jeanne persisted 'Not one?' she asked, in English, flattering him The memories fascinated her

'Some,' he said, relenting 'There was a farmer, a very nice old guy who worked real hard I used to work in a ditch with him, draining land for farming He wore overalls and he smoked a clay pipe, and half the time he wouldn't put tobacco in it I hated the work—it was hot and dirty, and broke my back—and all day long I'd watch the old man's spit which would run down the pipe stem, and hang on the bowl I used to make bets with myself on when it was going to fall off, and I always lost I never saw it fall off I'd just look around and it'd be gone, and then the new spit would be there'

Paul laughed soundlessly, and shook his head Jeanne was afraid to move, because he might stop talking

'And then we had a beautiful dog,' he went on, in a voice that she had not heard before It was almost a whisper 'My mother taught me to love nature—I guess that was the most she could do—and in front of our house we had this big field It was a mustard field in the summer, and our big black dog, named Dutchy, used to hunt for rabbits there But she couldn't see them, so she'd have to leap up in the air in this field, and look around quickly to see where the rabbits were It was very beautiful, but she never caught the rabbits'

Jeanne laughed aloud Paul looked at her in surprise

'You've been had,' she said triumphantly

'Oh, really?'

She mocked his sonorous voice, speaking English with a heavy accent, 'I don't want to know anything about your past, Baby'

Paul lay back and regarded her coldly Jeanne stopped laughing

'You think I was telling you the truth?' he asked, and when she didn't speak, he added, 'Maybe, maybe not'

Nonetheless, Jeanne felt that he had somehow been rendered

more human. It was she who initiated their third sexual dalliance of the day.

She said playfully, 'I'm Little Red Riding Hood, and you're a wolf.'

Paul began to growl, deep in his throat, but she silenced him by placing her hand on his lips. With the other hand she caressed his broad biceps.

'What strong arms you have,' she said.

Paul decided to play Jeanne's game, but he would play for his own ends, and with his own cruel humour. He had given up enough to her already.

He said, 'The better to squeeze a fart out of you.'

She examined his hand. 'What long nails you have.'

'The better to scratch your ass with.'

She ran her hand through his pubic hair. 'What a lot of fur you have.'

'The better to let your crabs hide.'

She peered into his mouth. 'Oh, what a long tongue you have!'

'The better to . . . ' Paul paused for effect, ' . . . stick in your ear, my dear.'

Jeanne took his penis in her hand, and squeezed it.

'What's this for?' she asked.

'That's your happiness,' he told her, 'and my hap-penis.'

Jeanne didn't understand the joke. 'Peanuts?' she said, thinking that was the word he had used.

Paul welcomed the opportunity to display his type of erudition.

'Shlong,' he said, while she maintained her grip. 'Wicnerwurst, cazzo, dick, prick, joint. . . '

She was charmed by his unabashed pride in the male organ.

'It's funny,' she said, 'this is like playing grown-ups when you're little. I feel like a child again here.'

'Did you have fun as a kid?' Paul asked absently. Her hand on him he accepted as both a tribute and stimulation, in that order.

'It's the most beautiful thing,' she said, away from the villa now and open to the swarm of idealized memories Paul expected this, and decided to destroy her memories—leisurely and in keeping with the mood

It's the most beautiful thing to be made into a tattle-tale,' he said, breathing heavily, 'or forced to admire authority or sell yourself for a piece of candy'

'I wasn't like that'

'No?'

'I was writing poems I was drawing castles—big castles with big towers'

'You never thought about sex?'

'No sex,' she said emphatically

'No, no sex' He pretended to believe her 'You were probably in love with your teacher, then'

'My teacher was a woman'

'Then she was a lesbian'

'How did you know?' She was both angered and amazed by his instincts She dimly remembered her teacher—Mademoiselle Sauvage—who made a point of scolding the girls, so she could comfort them later Was everything to prove corrupt? she wondered

'It's a classic situation,' Paul said 'Anyway, go on'

'My first love was my cousin, Paul'

The name—any name—annoyed him 'I'm going to get a haemorrhoid if you keep telling me names I don't mind if you tell the truth, but don't give me the names'

Jeanne apologized

She was reluctant to continue, but he understood her vulnerability and warmed to the attack

'Well, go on,' he said 'And tell the truth'

'I was thirteen He was dark, very thin I can see him, and his big nose It was romance—I fell in love with him when I heard him playing the piano'

'You mean when he first got into your knickers'

Paul eased one hand along her thigh, until the tips of his

fingers touched the outer lips of her vagina. He pretended to play an imaginary keyboard with the other.

'He was a child prodigy,' Jeanne said. 'He was playing with both hands.'

'I'll bet he was,' Paul snorted contemptuously. 'Probably getting his kicks.'

'We were dying of the heat. . .'

'Good excuse. What else?'

'In the afternoon, when the grown-ups were napping.'

'You started grabbing his joint.'

'You're crazy,' she said, with exasperation.

'Well,' Paul asserted, 'he touched you.'

'I never let him. Never!'

Paul sensed the conflict in her. She seemed close to some revelation, and he taunted her, chanting, 'Liar, liar, pants on fire, nose as long as a telephone wire! You mean to tell me that he didn't touch you? Look me straight in the eye and say, "He didn't touch me once." Go on, do it.'

Jeanne moved back from him, and looked down at her own body. Her breasts and thighs seemed heavy and sensual, she felt so much older, so removed from that remembered time. She wanted to stop remembering, but Paul wouldn't let her.

'No,' she admitted, 'he touched me. But the way he did it

Paul was standing over her now. 'The way he did it,' he said sarcastically. 'Okay, what'd he do?'

'Behind the house there were two trees, a sycamore and a chestnut. I sat under the sycamore, and he sat under the chestnut. We'd count one, two, three, and we'd each begin to masturbate. The first one who came

She looked up, and saw that Paul had turned away.

'Why aren't you listening to me,' she asked, switching back into French.

He didn't answer. He knew that even her innocence was sexual, and her confession was his triumph, but he wasn't finished yet.

They were startled by the unfamiliar clamour of the door-bell. A nasal, masculine voice reached them from the landing: 'The complete Bible, a unique edition, without cuts . . .'

Paul was enraged by the interruption. He moved towards the door, but Jeanne stood and grabbed his arm.

'Did we make a pact or not?' she whispered. 'Nobody will ever see us together. You could kill me, and nobody would ever know. Not even that Bible salesman out there.'

Paul placed his hands on her throat, and her breasts brushed his forearm.

'The true Bible!' the salesman called. 'Don't close your door to destiny!'

Paul detested the man without even seeing him. 'Biblical pig!' he muttered. He wanted to punish the man for disturbing them, but Jeanne wouldn't release him. He began to squeeze her neck. 'You're right,' he said. 'No one would know. Not the Bible salesman, and not that half-blind concierge.'

'You don't even have a motive.' She clutched his wrists, which seemed hard as wood. 'The perfect crime.'

His fingers tightened. He could feel the tendons in her neck, his thumbs met little resistance. How easy it would have been to conclude her banal memories, and his ability to learn them. Flesh, once corrupted, was as good as dead—Jeanne's, Rosa's, even his own. She had gotten him to reveal some of his past, and his weakness in which his rage was rooted. Someone else should suffer, and if not the Bible salesman, then her, for there was no one else at hand.

He released her, and Jeanne knelt on the mattress, clutching her neck. She breathed heavily, and wondered if he was only trying to frighten her.

The sound of the Bible salesman's receding footsteps barely reached them.

'When did you first come?' Paul asked her. 'How old were you?'

'The first time?' She tried to remember, relieved and somewhat flattered. How difficult he was to fathom, and how alone,

standing outlined against the window grey as wet slate The muscles in his back were flexed, as if he expected some assault

'I was very late for school,' she began 'Suddenly I felt a strong sensation, here' Jeanne touched her vagina 'I came as I ran Then I ran faster and faster, and the more I ran, the more I came Two days later I tried running again, but no dice'

Paul did not turn around She lay face down on the mattress, her hand still thrust between her legs It seemed strange to be telling him the dark secrets, which she could never share with Tom

'Why don't you listen to me?' she asked

Paul just walked into the adjoining room He felt as tight as a drawn wire He sat on the edge of a chair, and watched Jeanne She began to move her hips in a circular motion, in simulation of intercourse Her buttocks clenched

'You know,' she sighed, without looking at him 'It seems to me I'm talking to the wall'

She continued to manipulate herself with mounting pleasure

'Your solitude weighs on me It isn't indulgent or generous—you're an egotist' Her voice was distant, breathless 'I can be by myself too, you know'

Paul watched her rhythmically undulating young body, and his eyes filled with tears He didn't weep for the loss of her fanciful childhood, or his own sordid beginnings He wept for his own isolation

Jeanne writhed into climax, and then lay still, drained and physically exhausted.

'Amen,' he said

For a long time he sat without moving Finally she rose and, without looking at Paul, gathered her clothes together and walked into the bathroom

Paul's jacket hung from a clothes tree The salt-and-pepper houndstooth weave seemed common enough to Jeanne and on impulse, she checked the label, and found that it came from

Printemps, a large department store near the Opera. She hesitated, then dived into his pockets, drew out a few coins, a used Metro ticket from Bir Hakeim and a broken cigarette. She moved to the breast pocket, amazed at her own audacity, and discovered a wad of one-hundred-franc notes, but no papers or identification.

The door swung open suddenly, and Paul came in. He wore his trousers, and he carried an old leather briefcase in one hand. He propped it on the sink, and took out his shaving cream, soap, a long leather strap worn slick from the passage of many blades, and finally the straight razor with the bone handle.

'What am I doing in this apartment with you?' she asked him.

Paul ignored her. He began to lather his face.

'Love?' she suggested.

'Let's just say we're taking a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut.'

She didn't understand exactly what he said, but she knew it was some obscene metaphor describing his view of human endeavour.

'So you think I'm a whore.'

Jeanne had difficulty pronouncing the last word in English, and Paul teased her. 'I think you're a what? A *war*?'.

'Whore!' she shouted. 'Whore, whore.'

'No, you're just a dear, old-fashioned girl trying to get along.'

The tone of his voice insulted her. 'I prefer to be a whore.'

'Why were you going through my pockets?' he said.

Jeanne managed to betray no surprise. 'To find out who you are.'

'To find out who you are,' he repeated. 'Well, if you look real close, you'll see me hiding behind my zipper.'

She applied her mascara. Paul attached the razor strap to the tap, and began to whip the blade of the razor expertly over it.

'We know he buys his clothes in a big store,' Jeanne said
'That's not much, folks, but that's a beginning'

'That's not a beginning, that's a finish'

The earlier mood in the circular room had passed. The cold tiles about them had a chilling effect, but Jeanne persisted. She casually asked Paul his age.

'I'll be ninety-three this weekend,' he said.

'Oh? You don't look it.'

He began to shave with long, precise strokes.

'Have you been to college?' she asked.

'Oh yeah. I went to the University of the Congo. Studied whale fucking.'

'Barbers don't usually go to university.'

'Are you telling me that I look like a barber?'

'No,' she said, 'but that's a barber's razor.'

'Or a madman's.'

There was no humour in his voice.

'So you want to cut me up?' she decided.

'That would be like writing my name on your face.'

'Like they do the slaves?'

'Slaves are branded on the ass,' he said. 'And I want you free.'

'Free.' The word sounded strange to her. 'I'm not free.'

She looked at his reflection in the mirror. Paul held his chin high, watching the razor's progress over the corridor of his throat. His masculinity seemed threatened in that one, unguarded moment.

'Do you know what?' she said. 'You don't want to know anything about me because you hate women. What have they ever done to you?'

'Either they always pretend to know who I am, or they pretend that I don't know who they are. And that's very boring.'

'I'm not afraid to say who I am. I'm twenty years old. . .'

'Jesus Christ!' he said, turning on her. 'Don't wear out your brain!'

Jeanne started to speak again, but he held up the razor 'Shut up! Do you get it? I know it's tough, but you're going to have to bear it'

Jeanne relented

Paul dropped the razor into the bag. He rinsed his face, dried it, then gripped the edges of the sink and tested its solidity

'They're very rare' he said softly, 'you don't find them any more. I think it's the sinks that make us stay together, don't you think?'

He reached over and touched each of her toilet articles with his blunt fingers, almost delicately

'I think I'm happy with you,' he said

He kissed her unexpectedly, gently, and then turned and left the room

'*Encore!*' Jeanne called after him 'Do it again, again!'

She hurriedly completed her toilet, pleased with his admission. She dressed, and called to him gaily in French, 'I'm coming, I'm almost ready'

She opened the door and stepped into the dim hallway

'Can we leave together?' she asked, knowing now that he wouldn't object

But there was no answer. Paul had already left.

CHAPTER NINE

DARK BLOSSOMS formed a barricade before the window, seemed to clog the tub and sink, covered the chest of drawers. The bed remained empty. Paul stood in the open doorway, surveying his mother-in-law's handiwork. He was reluctant to enter. The thick, cloying odour of chrysanthemums sickened him, as did the obsequious words of his concierge, Raymond, whose manner reminded him of a mortician.

'Looks good,' Raymond said, stepping into the room ahead of Paul 'Don't you think so?'

'Only Rosa is missing'

'Your mother-in-law needed something to do This is a nice quiet room, if only it wasn't for the closet It's wormy—you can hear them in the wood'

Raymond pressed his bald head against the wardrobe closet, and made a sound resembling that of chewing

'I always put South Americans in this room,' he said, with an evil smirk 'South Americans never leave tips *No tengo dinero*, they always say *Mañana, mañana*'

Paul joked bitterly, 'We're full up, mister Only the funeral room's free'

Raymond's laugh sounded like a gasp 'That's good, Boss It does you good to laugh'

Paul turned away, and descended the stairs to the foyer A heavily made-up woman of intermediate age, wearing a sequined skirt beneath her coat, leaned over the open registration book, searching for the names of likely customers She was a guest, and a friend of Rosa's, and Paul tolerated her. He slammed the register closed in passing, and continued on into his own room, leaving the door open

'No interesting new faces today,' the prostitute said 'Want to bet on the races, Paul?'

Paul didn't answer He took a metal canister and a battered pot from beneath the stove, and went through the motions of making coffee.

'Poor Rosa and I used to know a woman who gave us tips,' she went on, not caring whether or not he listened 'Betting was a distraction And Rosa loved horses so much We were planning to buy one together'

'Rosa didn't know anything about horses,' Paul said

'What are you talking about? Rosa knew a lot about horses The circus people taught her to ride'

Paul took his seat behind the desk The woman's prattling annoyed him

'What circus people?' he asked wearily

'Rosa ran away when she was thirteen, and followed the circus. It's funny she never told you about it.'

Paul wanted to silence her. The idea of his wife making up fabrications for a prostitute's pleasure revolted him almost as much as did the sight of this woman's opalescently white calves. Was it possible that she knew more about Rosa than he? She sensed his displeasure, and went up the stairs.

'Why did she do it?' Paul heard her say. 'Sunday was the Grand Prix at Auteuil.'

A young man in a trench coat stood before Paul. He knew the man was an American because he carried a flight bag, he waited to be spoken to, and he had the eyes of something hunted that Paul had seen so often.

'You want a room?' Paul asked in French, out of spite.

'Yes. I'm from Dusseldorf. The winter is very long there.'

It was the same phrase they all used. The tawdry theatrics of army deserters seemed pathetic to Paul. But they were paying customers, a habit rather than a necessity.

'And you left without saying anything?' Paul said.

The young man nodded. 'About the passport. I'll have one in a couple of days.'

Paul took a key from the board, and led the way upstairs. He opened the door of the room next to Rosa's funeral parlour, and watched as the young man dropped his bag on the bed, and turned to him with an expression of gratitude.

'About the money,' he said, 'I don't know when I'll be able to pay you.'

Paul just looked at him. He no longer cared about the money, but neither did he care to offer solicitude. He shut the door in the deserter's face, and turned back towards the stairs.

CHAPTER TEN

THE SIGHT of a pretty girl weeping on the Avenue John Kennedy should have attracted more attention. The street lamps blinked on one by one, frail and unnecessary compared to the blaze of car lights massed almost bumper to bumper, locked in a maniacal struggle for position, loud and indifferent to the human beings who clung to the pavement. The men Jeanne passed looked first at her legs, and then her breasts, and by the time they saw her tears she was past them.

She wiped her sleeve across her eyes, and turned impulsively into a restaurant. The stark white light and the greasy smell of meat cooking on skewers confronted her, and she moved quickly through the loud ranks of shop girls and clerks, towards the telephone booth in the rear.

She located a *jeton* in the bottom of her purse, deposited it and dialled Tom's number. He answered almost immediately, and she found she couldn't speak. Annoyed by the silence, Tom began to swear.

'Just as I imagined,' she said, 'you get vulgar right away. Listen, I have to talk to you, and I don't have time to explain.

I'm in Passy. No, not over the telephone. Meet me at the Metro stop.'

She began to cry again, and hung up. Everyone wanted something from her, there was no time to rest—no quarter. They were using her up, something must be eliminated. She thought of Tom's camera probing the hidden crevices of her life. Surely that was expendable.

She left the *brasserie*, and hurried back to the Metro station. She stood on the platform across the tracks from the one where Tom would arrive, her hands shoved deep in her coat pockets, watching the bright red trains come and go.

She thought of Paul, and her tears dried. Her ambivalence tormented her.

Tom stood on the opposite platform, staring at her 'What are you doing over there?' he said

'I have to talk to you '

He headed for the stairs, but Jeanne stopped him

'Don't come,' she shouted 'Stay there '

Tom was as annoyed as he was confused. He looked up and down the platform, before asking her 'Why wouldn't you tell me over the telephone? Why here?'

Because only here there was enforced distance, she wanted to say. Here she was safe, at least for the moment.

'You must find someone else,' she told him

'For what?'

'For your film '

Tom seemed in agony 'Why?'

'Because you're taking advantage of me,' she said 'Because you force me to do things I've never done before. Because you take up my time .'

They were the charges she wanted to bring against Paul, but couldn't, and the frustration and the fatigue brought fresh tears to her eyes.

'and because of the kind of things you make me do, anything that comes into your head. The film is finished, understand?'

Tom just held out his hands in confusion. The Metro clamoured into the station, blocking him from her sight, and Jeanne knew that was the end: the train would glide away with him in it, and that would be the end of that complication.

She was thankful there was no time to experience either pleasure or pain. It was simply finished.

The Metro pulled out. Tom was gone.

She turned, and he was standing next to her.

'I'm tired of being raped!' she screamed.

They stalked each other like cats. Awkwardly, he swung at her, and the blow glanced ineffectually from her shoulder; she reared back, and slung at him with her purse. They

all, Rosa's husband, and it was her duty to ease his pain. The contact soothed her, too. She was aware that Rosa had chosen what she considered to be a real man.

'You're not alone, Paul,' she whispered, feeling the breadth of his chest. 'I'm here.'

He gently raised her hand and looked at it, and she felt a rush of gratitude. He moved it towards his lips, and then with sudden, brutal efficiency, he bit it.

Mère gasped and began to claw at the chair to get away from him. She cradled the assaulted hand.

'You're insane,' she cried. 'I'm beginning to understand.'

She didn't finish the sentence, but Paul knew what she wanted to say—that he had driven Rosa to suicide. He had no objection to playing that role—it was no more absurd than his present one of bereaved husband, secret lover, hotel clerk.

He leapt up from the couch.

'Do you want me to stop that music?' he asked, moving across the room towards the fuse box. 'Okay, I'll make them shut up.'

'What are you doing, Paul?' she asked fearfully.

'What's the matter, Mère, you upset?' He spoke in English, quickly and contemptuously. 'Don't be upset, nothing to be upset about. You know, it takes so very little to make them afraid.'

He pulled the circuit switch, and the whole *pension* lapsed into sudden darkness. She gasped and clung to the chair. Paul moved towards her.

'You want to know what they're afraid of?' he said loudly. 'I'll tell you what they're afraid of. They're afraid of the dark, imagine that.'

He took her roughly by the arm, and led her towards the foyer.

'Come on, Mère. I want you to meet my friends.'

'Lights,' she said. 'Lights!'

He pulled her towards the foot of the stairs. The sound of the saxophone had died a sudden death. The upper storeys of

the hotel filled with the sound of opening doors, shuffling feet, hushed voices speaking in several languages

'I think you ought to meet a few clients of the hotel,' Paul said, with desperate irony, and he began to shout up the stairwell 'Hey, folks! I'd like you to say hello to Mom'

Someone struck a match on the second landing, and Paul could see the ghostly, amorphous shapes massed there. Another match flared. He glimpsed faces he had seen for years—the human flotsam of which he was a part—grotesque and frail, and for their fear he despised them even more.

'Mom,' he shouted, gesturing towards the faces with one hand, gripping her arm with the other, 'this is Mister Juice-head Junkie here. And Mister Saxophone, he's our connection, Mom, he gives us some hard stuff once in a while.'

She tried to pull away from him. 'Let me go!' she gasped, but Paul held on.

'and right here is the beautiful Miss Best Blow-job of 1933! She still makes a few points when she takes out her teeth. Don't you want to say hello, Mom? This is Mom, everybody!'

The babble of languages grew stronger.

'The light, Paul,' she pleaded. 'Turn on the light.'

'Oh, you afraid of the dark, Mom? She's afraid of the dark,' he called up to the guests. 'Aw, poor little thing. All right, sweetheart, I'll take care of you. Don't worry about it for a second.'

Paul struck a match, and his own face showed ghostly from among the shadows. He laughed long and humourlessly, threw the match aside, and made his way back into the room. He restored the switch, and the lights came on. How easy it was to frighten them, he thought. They seemed equally afraid of being killed, and killing.

He stepped back into the foyer. The crowd in bathrobes and hastily-donned raincoats dispersed, murmuring like dumb beasts. His mother-in-law still gripped the banister, watching him in utter disbelief.

A guest came in from the street, carrying a roll of newspapers beneath one arm. He was older than Paul, but trim and distinguished-looking in his well-brushed overcoat and his Tyrolean hat, which he promptly took off.

'Hello, Marcel,' Paul said, without emotion. He handed him his key.

Marcel nodded pleasantly to Paul's mother-in-law, and climbed the stairs. She looked after him approvingly.

'Do you like him, Mère?' Paul asked.

She sensed some fresh trap, and was silent. He smiled sarcastically, and shook his head. To him this was the night's final, crushing irony.

'Well,' he said, 'he was Rosa's lover.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

TIME HUNG suspended between the ornate stone façades of the Rue Jules Verne. Jeanne never turned into the street without first looking behind her, in case someone she knew might be watching. She had memorized the order of the parked cars. The café's bright, tattered awning, and the deserted scaffolding across from the apartment building to which she returned again and again were totally familiar.

She welcomed the cold, stuffy gloom of the lobby. The concierge's window was closed, and the building appeared as deserted as ever. Jeanne stepped into the elevator, and placed the portable record player she carried on the floor between her feet. Her anxiety about Paul mounted. As always, she wanted him, and feared to find him there. But their last encounter had ended so differently—so gently—that her anticipation ascended with her.

As she unlocked the apartment door, she thought she caught the same lilting, fading bar of music. The door swung open

into what she thought were empty rooms Her footsteps echoed off the tiles, and she could see half the circular room, and the mattress she knew so well, touched by sunlight She called out, 'Anybody here?' knowing there would be no answer

She set the record player on the floor, and turned towards the discarded furniture draped in the sheet The shape was a bit frightening, and she addressed it playfully, trying to minimize her disappointment, 'Something wrong? You have your problems, too *N'est-ce pas?*'

Jeanne had not noticed that Paul lay in the far corner of the room, silent and inattentive On the floor before him lay a partially eaten Camembert, a broken crust of bread, and a knife He wore only trousers and an undershirt, his hair was dishevelled, and the flesh about his eyes dark from lack of sleep He didn't even look up when he finally spoke, 'There's butter in the kitchen'

Jeanne wheeled on him 'So you're here,' she said, concealing her fright 'Why didn't you answer?'

'Go get the butter,' he told her

'I have to hurry I have an appointment'

'Go get the butter!'

She looked at him in amazement The day before was forgotten He now looked brutish, stretched on the unswept floor, propped up on one elbow, crumbs of bread clinging to his lips, toying with the cheese He seemed like some caged animal, waiting to be fed

Jeanne went into the kitchen, and came back with the butter wrapped in tin foil She flung it down on the floor in front of him, and only that small violence seemed to get his attention Paul looked at her with an expression of mild interest It was her first act of defiance, but she wasn't strong enough to leave him

'It makes me crazy,' she said in her curious English, squatting cross-legged before him 'You're so damned sure I'll come back'

Paul just spread the butter on the remaining crust, and ate

it, chewing noisily. He tossed the bit of tin foil aside, and wiped his mouth with back of his hand. He would do nothing to try and convince her to stay, but if she stayed, he would test her strength.

'What do you think,' she asked ironically, speaking French though she knew he preferred English, 'that an American lying on the floor in an empty house, eating cheese and stale bread, is interesting?'

She tempted him, but he remained calm. The sight of him disgusted, and at the same time excited her. She wondered why it was that his slovenliness appealed to her sexually, when it degraded and angered her, as did his contempt. Paul's anger and frustration had been mounting since the night before, and now he directed it towards her, indiscriminately. She was, after all, just a body—that was the idea of their pact.

Jeanne drummed her nails irritably on the floor. She tapped with her knuckles, producing a hollow sound.

'What's under here?' she said, knocking again. 'It's a hollow space. Can you hear it?'

Paul roused himself, and crawled forward. He rapped on the floor with his fist, then ran his fingernail along the edge of the board, loosening what seemed to be the cover of a hiding place.

'Don't open it,' Jeanne said.

'Why not?'

'I don't know. Don't open it.'

She grabbed Paul's wrist.

'What about that?' he said. 'Can't I open it?'

He watched her, his interest growing. He could easily have opened the secret place, but he preferred to wait. Her resistance excited him.

'Now wait a minute,' he said, tearing her hand from his wrist. 'Maybe there's jewels in it. Maybe there's gold.'

Jeanne couldn't look at him. She didn't want him to open it, but she was reluctant to tell him why.

'You afraid?' he taunted. 'You're always afraid.'

Again he reached for the board

'No,' she said 'Maybe there's some family secrets inside '

Paul withdrew his hand

'Family secrets?' he said, and his voice was deceptively docile 'I'll tell you about family secrets '

Paul grasped her neck in one hand, and her arm in the other, and forced her to lie face down on the parquet floor. He felt unreasonable anger at her mention of the family—that great moral institution, he thought, untouchable divine creation, formed to breed virtue in good citizens, tabernacle of all virtues and, just incidentally, everything he most hated.

Jeanne struggled feebly 'What are you doing?' she asked, as he slipped his hand beneath her body, and unbuttoned her jeans

'I'm going to tell you about the family,' he said, violently wrenching her trousers down around her knees, and baring her buttocks 'That holy institution, meant to breed virtue into savages '

Jeanne gasped for breath, struggling. Paul pinned her with the weight of his own body, one hand gripping the back of her neck. For a moment he seemed uncertain of what course to take, but then he saw the tin foil wrapper containing the butter. With one foot he retrieved it.

'I want you to repeat after me,' he said, digging the fingers of his free hand into the soft butter. Leisurely, he applied it to her anus, greasing her, he thought, like a pig for the skewer. His fingers were brutally efficient.

'No and no,' she insisted, not really believing that he would go through with it 'No '

Paul unfastened and stripped away his own trousers. He rose on his knees, still pressing against the back of Jeanne's neck and forced his legs between hers. Jeanne felt herself being primed for the assault, and she felt terror and utter helplessness.

'Now repeat after me Holy family ' he began, spreading her buttocks with his strong fingers. He lay against her,

probing for entrance 'Come on, say it! Holy family, the church of good citizens'

'Church,' she cried, 'good citizens'

She screamed, her face pressed against the smooth boards, her eyes clamped shut The pain was sudden, and excruciating His penis had become a weapon

'Say it!' he commanded, breathing heavily 'The children are tortured until they tell their first lie. . '

'The children'

She cried out again, as he forced himself deeper into her

'Where the will is broken by repression,' he said, the words hissing between his teeth

'Where the will is broken'

She began to sob, as much from humiliation as pain Paul only renewed his assault, his body seized by an urgent, mounting rhythm He was huge in that virgin place

'Where freedom is assassinated,' he said

'Freedom is'

'Freedom is assassinated by egotism'

His fingers dug into her flesh, as if she might evaporate and leave him stranded There was no escaping him now, and no denial, and her sobs only seemed to propel him deeper

'Family'

'Family,' she repeated, in a long, dying wail

'Your fucking, fucking family,' he gasped, stiffening 'Oh, God, Jesus!'

Jeanne lay pinned to the floor, utterly helpless Paul's spasm passed, but he didn't withdraw from her He took her hair in one hand, and turned her face towards the hollow spot in the floor. With the other hand he raised the board slightly

'Open it!' he told her

'Why?' Jeanne sobbed What more could he want, after this ultimate degradation?

'Open it!' he said

She raised the board, exposing a cavity in the floor no larger than the size of a brick It was empty

Paul tumbled from her, and lay heaving on the floor. All offices had now been violated, all were empty. His void remained unfilled.

Slowly Jeanne pulled on her pants, stifling her sobs, wiping her nose on the rough, woven sleeve of her peasant's blouse. She could have left him then, but she sensed that her own power was on the ascendancy. He had no right to brand her that way—like a slave.

She went into the hall and picked up her record player, and carried it into the living room, where she knelt to open it. She unwound the wire and, taking the plug, inserted it into the old socket in the floor. Blue sparks spat at her, and she jerked her hand away, shocked.

'*Merde*!' she exclaimed.

She looked in at Paul, who seemed recovered, one arm lying across his face. Jeanne remembered that she didn't know his name.

'Hey, you!' she called.

He turned towards her. 'Yeah?' he said thickly.

'I've got a surprise for you.'

'What?' Paul didn't understand, and she motioned to him, pretending to smile.

'I've got a surprise for you.'

Paul raised himself to his knees, and buttoned his trousers.

'That's good,' he said. 'I like surprises.'

He had already dismissed what had gone before—just another temple to defile and she hated him more for that dismissal than for the act. She wanted to hurt him, to short circuit that powerful body, to see his strength drain away and some evidence of physical torment. She could barely wait.

'What is it?' Paul asked.

'Music,' she said, still smiling. 'But I don't know how to make it work.'

She handed him the cord, and pointed to the socket in the floor. Then she moved back. Paul gripped the plug, and without hesitation, forced it hard into the socket. There was a

spray of sparks, and a loud cracking noise as he jumped, and flung away the cord

You enjoy that?' he asked, controlling himself

Jeanne wasn't sure

'You know,' she said, 'there's a cat that's got it in for me. He only comes when you're not here. The minute you leave, he'll come in. He'll look at me.'

Her eyes filled with tears

'Are you crying about the cat?' he asked, unmoved

'I'm crying because I knew you'd get a shock, and I didn't say anything. I'm crying because of what you did. I'm crying because I can't take it any more.'

'That's a phrase for suicides,' Paul said matter-of-factly. 'Some of them even write that down. Are you going to kill yourself?'

'Why do you ask me that?'

'No particular reason.' He paused. 'You think about suicide at least once a day, right?'

'Not me. But I like the idea—it's romantic.'

'I used to know someone who never seemed to think about it, and then committed suicide.'

Jeanne jumped to her feet

'Oh, my God,' she said. 'I forgot my appointment. I only came here to give you the record player.'

'Appointments are for breaking.'

She dried her tears on the sleeve of her coat, and looked down at him. Paul hadn't moved.

'And you?' she asked, heading for the door.

'What about me?'

'Are you going to kill yourself?'

Paul smiled for the first time

'I'm not the type who kills himself,' he said. 'I'm the type who kills.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE OLD BARGE listed heavily to starboard, its name—*L'Atalante*, like the old Vigo movie—barely discernible among the flakes of peeling paint on the prow. Jeanne had often passed it, moored in the Canal St Martin, draped in strings of coloured lights and displaying a sign above the cabin advertising it as a dance hall.

The sign had toppled, the huge rusted cables seemed barely able to keep the barge afloat, and the foredeck was piled with bits of cheap furniture, lamp shades, and a few brass nautical fittings.

Jeanne hurried across the cobblestones of the quay. Tom and his crew waited patiently in the prow, and she waved. He seemed so harmless now, and so predictable, compared with Paul's unreasonable violence. Whatever Tom did, it was simply a game—a game of film making—but with Paul things were never the same. Each time he pushed her farther, and there was no going back. It seemed that every time she met Tom, she brought with her a new and more extreme degradation that he would never even suspect.

She was growing accustomed to this double life, though each time she left Paul, she told herself that it was the last time.

The barge captain stood among his junk, gripping a cigar in one heavily tattooed hand. 'I won't sell anything,' he told her, as she came aboard.

'Everyone has something to sell,' Jeanne said, smiling. Some of his scrap she could use in her little antique shop near Les Halles.

Tom came forward, took her by the arm and gently led her to the railing in the prow. The cameraman shoved his hands into a black bag, hastily loading new film, the soundman squatted on the deck, preparing for the interview. He frowned

when the captain put an old seventy-eight record on his phonograph, and a nasal masculine voice began to sing 'Parlami d'amore Mariu', accompanied by much static

Tom asked Jeanne, 'What is your profession?'

'I'm a busybody'

She smiled for the camera

'I thought you were an antique dealer,' he said with a certain gravity.

'No, I'm in business with the twins I'm the nosy one, I dig things up'

'What kind of things?'

'Everything from 1880 to 1935'

'Why just those years?'

'Because, in antiques, those years were revolutionary'

He looked at her in exasperation

'I don't understand,' he said 'Repeat, please What kind of years were they?'

'Revolutionary. Yes, Art Nouveau is revolutionary in comparison with the rest of the nineteenth century and the Victorian era Compared with bric-a-brac and bad taste'

'Bad taste?'

Tom looked around at the members of the crew, as if seeking some explanation, Jeanne obviously wasn't responding as he had planned

'Taste?' he repeated. 'What is that? And how can you feel revolutionary about collecting old things that once were revolutionary?'

'Do you want to fight?' she asked, realizing that he was taunting her

'Okay, okay'

He raised his hands in acquiescence

'Where do you find these revolutionary objects?'

'At auctions, at different markets, in the country, in private homes . '

'You go into people's homes? What kind of people are these?'

'Old people,' she said, 'or else their sons, nephews, grandchildren. They wait for the old folks to die. And then they sell it all, as fast as they can.'

'Isn't that a little morbid? Frankly, it disgusts me a little. The smell of old things, the remains of the dead.'

'No, it's exciting.'

She paced the deck, enthusiastic now.

'The way I operate,' she explained, 'the past is exciting. It's a find—an object with a history. Listen, once I found the alarm clock of the executioner of Paris.'

'That's disgusting. Would you like to have the hangman's alarm clock next to your bed?'

She stepped up to him, hands on her hips.

'Are you really trying to start a fight?' she asked. 'Or do you simply have an aversion to antiques?'

'I listen to you peddle this old stuff, talk about that disgusting alarm clock.'

He paused, controlling the emotion in his voice and went on.

'And then I see you—healthy, clean, modern.'

'Modern?' She laughed. 'What does that mean? It's only fashion. Look around you. Dresses from the 'thirties, or 'forties.'

'Dresses I can understand. That makes me think of movies.'

He spread his arms, looking towards the sky.

'... of stars when there really were stars.' Rita Hayworth.

Jeanne shook her head in disappointment.

'When it comes to movies,' she said, 'then you understand. Well, that's a way of refusing the present. I'm in the process of having a dress made like the one my mother wore in the photograph in 1946. She was beautiful, with those square shoulders.'

'Well,' Tom interrupted, 'that's a way of refusing the present.'

'It's just a lot easier to love something that doesn't affect us too directly, something which keeps a certain distance Like your camera '

It was a kind of indictment Tom looked hurt, turned and spoke rapidly to the cameraman

'Distances! You'll see Give me the camera, I'll go on from here '

He told the soundman to hang up the microphone

'Let it run Now beat it, all of you!' He shooed even the script girl away and turned angrily back to Jeanne 'I don't live on nostalgia The present tense is something Sit on that swing '

He pointed to an almost dilapidated swing constructed in the prow, she followed his instructions, impressed by his sudden show of initiative

He talked while he focused the camera

'Move a little Sing '

Jeanne began to swing She hummed the song, 'Une jolie fille sur la balançoire', and played the part

Tom laughed

'That's something else,' he said 'You know why I sent them away?'

'Because you're angry Or because you want to be alone with me '

'And why do I want to be alone with you?'

'You have something to tell me,' she speculated 'In private '

'Bravo!' shouted Tom 'What?'

'Is it happy or sad?'

'It's a secret '

'Then it's happy What kind of a secret?'

'Let's see '

He pretended to be thinking

' a secret between a man and a woman '

'Then it's obscene,' she said, laughing 'Or it's about love '

'Yes, love But that's not all '

'A secret about love '

She rested her chin on her fist, Tom continued to press his eye to the camera viewer

'A secret about love with something that's not love in it,' she said 'You've got me'

'I wanted to tell you that, a week from now, I'm going to marry you'

'How about that!'

'Naturally, it depends on you'

'And you?'

'I've decided,' he said 'Everything's ready'

'Oh, Tom, all of this is so bizarre It seems impossible'

'The shot's a bit shaky My hands are trembling with emotion'

She began to swing back and forth, raising her feet higher each time

'You haven't answered yet,' he called out

'Because I don't understand any of it'

Her face was deeply flushed, her smile broad and uncompromising She looked around her—at the canal, the captain packing his junk in boxes, the houses lining the quay and the bare plane trees, the synchronized flight of a pair of pigeons—and could concentrate on nothing Slowly the swing came to a halt

'Well?' said Tom 'Yes or no?'

A trace of anxiety passed across her face, she put her arms around his neck

'Stop shooting,' she whispered 'I'm supposed to marry you, not the camera'

Tom picked up an old life preserver and, in celebration, hurled it out into the water of the canal, to their surprise, it promptly sank

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JEANNE opened the door to her mother's apartment with her own key. She had run up the stairs instead of taking the elevator, anxious to convey the good news, the sight of their expansive, comfortably-furnished sitting room had a slightly dampening effect upon her. Primitive African weapons and art objects similar to those hanging in the villa covered one wall. The room was bright and airy, but conveyed a sense of nostalgia and time lost.

She ran into her mother's room.

A handsome woman with carefully styled, greying hair and an innate air of authority stood over the bed, which was cluttered with old army uniforms. She held a pair of well-preserved, highly polished boots against her bosom.

'H'lo, Mother,' Jeanne said, hugging her.

'You're back early.'

'Uh-huh, just so happens I am.'

She strutted around the room, casually inspecting the gold braid on one of the uniforms, and touching the heels of the boots.

'I'm in a very good mood,' she said.

'Good.'

Her mother held up the boots admiringly.

'Tell me. What do you think? Shall I send them out to the villa?'

'Send everything.'

She pirouetted in the middle of the floor, arms raised, flung the hair out of her face.

'Olympia's the museum of the family, anyway.'

'But not the boots,' her mother insisted. 'I'll keep them here with me. It makes me shiver just to touch them.'

Jeanne picked up a round cap encrusted with braid, set it at an angle on her head, she picked up a heavy wool uniform

in drab and ran her hand over the epaulets and the gold buttons

'Uniforms,' she said 'All those military things never seem to age'

She discarded the coat and cap Her father's old regulation military pistol lay exposed in the bureau drawer, she took it from the worn holster and inspected it The cartridges were still in place

'It used to seem so heavy when I was little, and Papa was teaching me to shoot it'

She aimed it at the potted vine hanging in the window.

'Why don't you send it?' she asked her mother 'What are you going to do with a gun?'

'In any respectable household, a firearm is always useful'

She began to pack the uniforms into the open suitcases.

Jeanne replaced the pistol, shut the drawer, she began to rummage through a box of old papers

'You don't even know how to hold it,' she said

'The important thing is to have it It has its own effect'

Jeanne discovered a cracked, red leather wallet in the box She turned her back to her mother, and opened it and pulled out the Colonel's old identity card Then she discovered a photograph hidden underneath the card, yellow and cracked it was of a young Arab girl, proudly displaying her bare breasts to the camera

Jeanne hid the wallet in her purse She turned to her mother and showed her the photograph

'And her?' she asked 'Who is she?'

Her mother's frown was almost imperceptible Obviously this had been one of the Colonel's many mistresses during his African campaigns

'Fine example of a Berber,' she said, with dignity, as she continued to pack 'A strong race I tried to keep several in the house, but they make terrible domestics'

She was the female counterpart of the successful professional soldier—a model of perfection and stoicism under duress Now

her duty was to the revered memory of her gallant husband
she would let nothing sully it

She closed a suitcase decisively, and set it on the floor. She
smiled at her daughter

'I'm glad I decided to send all that to the country. Things
keep piling up.'

Jeanne kissed her affectionately

'Soon you'll have all the room you want.'

Her mother looked at her, but Jeanne turned and walked to
the door

'I've got to go,' she said. 'I haven't finished working. I just
stopped by to tell you.'

She stepped out on to the landing, and her mother followed.
Jeanne leaned on the button for the elevator

'Tell me what?' her mother asked

'That I'm getting married.'

She opened the elevator door and stepped inside

'You're what?'

Her mother gripped the ornate elevator cage, staring at her
incredulously

'I'm getting married in a week,' called Jeanne, as she
dropped from sight

On her way to the shop, Jeanne stepped into an automatic
photo machine in the Bir Hakeim Metro station. She pushed
the coins into the slot, pulled the string on the short, plastic
curtain and found herself alone on a hard wooden bench,
facing her own reflection in the two-way mirror

The flashbulb fired. She turned her face to the right, then to
the left, waiting each time for the automatic camera to photo-
graph her

Impulsively she unbuttoned her blouse, and thrust her
exposed breasts towards the lens

'Fine example of a Berber,' she said to herself, as the last
flash fired

Waiting on the Metro platform, Jeanne stared down into the
narrow, cluttered street, watching people move furtively past

the café, some of them carrying valises—travellers from St Lazare, she thought absently, many of them foreigners. She touched the Berber photograph in her pocket, and the one she had just made of herself. The first one had told her something about her father she had never suspected—now she thought of him as a man capable of sexual desire, and of inspiring it. Even he must have had a secret life, and the idea intrigued her. If her mother had known, she no longer cared. How quickly people accommodated themselves to the demands of flesh. By having herself photographed with her breasts bared, she felt she had established a new relationship with her father. She had also done it as a joke, she told herself, and she wanted to share it with one of her lovers. Then she realized that both Tom and Paul would disapprove, but for different reasons. Tom would call her vulgar, and Paul would torture her for her sentimentality.

Jeanne boarded the train, and rode across town thinking of her adventure, ignorant of the other passengers. The idea that her father might have had an affair seemed to justify her encounters with Paul. But if she was really going to marry Tom, she would have to make some adjustment at least in her own mind, or something disastrous would result.

She left the train, and walked past the shell of the old Les Halles market to her antique shop. The first thing she noticed was that her windows needed washing. The single room was a jungle—lampstands, hat racks, the spindly legs of upturned chairs, and a settee massed with dusty bottles. A barrel full of old walking-sticks stood next to the door.

In the rear of the shop, her helpers—Monique and Mouchette—were unpacking a box of junk. Twins, they both wore their tangled blonde hair long, and their jeans were covered with bright patches. Technically they were Jeanne's assistants. She had started the shop with money from her mother, but it was mostly the twins who confronted the rich matrons from Auteuil who came to buy Jeanne's relics. They were younger than Jeanne, but because they had participated in the student

revolt of 1968 while still in grade school, they tended to treat her like an impetuous younger sister

'Hello,' Jeanne called 'I'm getting married' She knew they did not approve of Tom

The twins straightened up, and pushed their hair from their eyes They looked at Jeanne in disbelief, and then at each other

'What's it going to be like married?' Monique asked

'I'll be calmer, more organized,' Jeanne said, unbuttoning her coat She planned to help with the unpacking and pricing, like the responsible proprietor she wished she could be 'I've decided to get serious'

The twins merely laughed

'What would you do in my place?' Jeanne asked

'I'd hit myself over the head,' Mouchette said

'I'd become a nun,' said Monique

And give up sex? Jeanne thought She started to slip out of her coat, then paused She would begin by telling Paul that she was to be married, that their adventure was over After all, her parents' marriage had endured, probably because of just such self-denial on her father's part For the moment she felt terribly strong

'I've made a major decision,' she said, buttoning her coat again 'It's over I'll never see him again after today'

'No wedding?' called Mouchette

'Yes,' said Jeanne, over her shoulder 'I'm getting married I'm a free woman!'

Monique and Mouchette exchanged glances, more confused than ever

'I'll never understand her,' said Monique

'In any case,' Mouchette said, 'you don't say "free", you say "liberated"'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A FREE WOMAN! Jeanne turned the phrase over in her mind as she left the shop. Self-absorbed, she did not notice the panel truck parked at the kerb.

Inside the truck, concealed behind stacks of cartons, knelt Tom and his crew, crowded together with sound equipment and the Arriflex, and a jumble of wires. Tom pressed the camera to his eye, focusing on Jeanne as she ran towards the corner. The script girl, her hair tied up in a scarf, knelt beside him, their shoulders touching, but Tom was absorbed in his quarry.

'If I were in Jeanne's place,' the script girl said, 'I'd forget about the wedding, after a number like this.'

Tom shifted position for a better view. The motor started with a loud blast, but the driver waited to see if Jeanne would hail a cab from the corner.

'You're acting like a private eye,' the script girl told Tom.

He didn't answer, but moved his hand up over her sweater until it covered her small, firm breast. He pinched it playfully. 'Maybe you'd like to be in her place,' he said, without taking his eye from the camera.

Jeanne turned the corner, and began walking up the street. The driver followed closely, then pulled abreast of her. Tom hefted the Arriflex to his cameraman, making motions for him to begin filming.

They were silent now, and intent.

Traffic halted at the light. Suddenly Jeanne turned and headed directly for the truck.

'She's seen us,' said Tom. 'We're screwed.'

She came closer. Tom ducked, waving his crew down behind him. Aside from filming, he had a motive for following Jeanne, though he didn't like to admit it, even to himself. For the last few days he thought she had behaved strangely—arriving late,

leaving abruptly, fighting in a Metro station. Something was wrong.

A door slammed next to the truck. Tom cautiously peered out of the window. Jeanne was seated in the back seat of a taxi. 'Not screwed, after all,' he said.

The taxi pulled off.

'Keep your distance,' Tom told his driver. 'She must not see us.'

The taxi stopped at the next light. Jeanne leaned over the front seat and gave instructions to the driver. She had no idea that just a few feet from her hovered the lens of a camera. The light changed, and the truck took up its position behind the taxi.

Jeanne was oblivious of the outside world. She opened her purse, and took out her make-up kit. She brushed her eyelashes with mascara, and precisely outlined her mouth with magenta lipstick.

Her taxi stopped within view of the ornate railway bridge leading into Passy. It was crowded with afternoon commuters spilling from the Metro station, and she wondered vaguely if Paul were among them. She got out, paid the driver hurriedly, and then started across the street in the direction of the Viaduc Café, and the Rue Jules Verne's familiar façades.

Tom and his crew knelt together, their faces pressed against the tiny window.

'Where are we?' he asked, watching as Jeanne passed the café.

'The Rue Jules Verne,' the driver said. 'In the seventh arrondissement.'

'The mystery is complete,' Tom shrugged his shoulders, and instructed the cameraman to keep filming. The possibility that Jeanne might be on her way to another lover occurred to him.

'All right,' he said nervously. 'Now pass her.'

Jeanne had almost reached the apartment building with the high iron gate. The truck pulled ahead of her.

The street was just as it always was, sedate and almost empty of passing cars. The scaffolding across the street loomed like the skeleton of some prehistoric beast, and the distant rattle of the Metro reached Jeanne. She paused next to the door of opaque yellow glass.

The truck stopped and sat with the motor idling.

Jeanne turned towards the door of the apartment building. Something in the street caught her eye—a panel truck. The back door was slightly open. A long, dark cylinder protruded from the crack between the doors—the shotgun mike. She recognized it instantly. She now had to make a choice.

Panic and anger gave way to a scheme. She turned, and continued up the street.

‘Are you sure she hasn’t seen you?’ Tom asked the soundman.

‘It’s practically impossible,’ he said, drawing the mike almost out of sight, as the truck rolled slowly forward again.

‘Do your best,’ Tom said. ‘Just try to get her footsteps, and some of the mood.’

Jeanne felt like screaming. She wanted to attack Tom, she wanted to fly away, and never be bothered again. By now the truck seemed so conspicuous that she wanted to laugh or make obscene gestures. But that would suit Tom’s purpose. It would be better to deceive him, and in such a way that he couldn’t fail to understand.

She paused on the next corner. Across the street stood a Romanesque church, the stone dark with soot and age. Without looking right or left, she crossed to it, and slipped behind the heavy wooden door.

‘Stop!’ Tom told the driver, and turned to his crew. ‘No sound!’

He swung open the doors, and jumped into the street. ‘On tiptoe now,’ he cautioned, as the others scrambled out behind him. Tom felt that he had discovered the essence of Jeanne at last. It would never have occurred to him that she was religious. The idea pleased him. It confirmed her purity.

The church was gloomy and almost deserted. A bank of flickering candles filled one alcove. The altar was illuminated only by the dying light of day, filtered through sombre stained glass high above the chapel. The cameraman raised the Arriflex to his eye and, following Tom's hand signals, filmed the stained-glass windows and then swept down through the nave, searching for Jeanne.

She was kneeling in a confessional, her hands clasped in prayer.

'Zoom in on her,' Tom instructed, and he and the others crept forward. They moved closer, until they could plainly hear her words.

'You're a bastard, Tom,' she said, her eyes focused straight ahead. 'You're a bastard, a bastard. A *bastard*! I loathe you, I hate you.'

Tom stumbled closer, unable to believe what he was hearing. He stood next to her, wanting an explanation, but unable to speak. She continued her litany, without ever raising her eyes.

The script girl came forward, and took Tom by the arm. 'That's enough,' she whispered.

'You're right,' he said. 'She really screwed me.'

The crew followed him outside. No one spoke as they clambered back into the truck and unloaded their equipment. Tom felt foolish, angry. The truck jerked forward, and rumbled up the Rue Jules Verne.

The nave grew darker. An unfelt breeze stirred the candle flames. For several minutes Jeanne didn't move. She knew she had made Tom suffer, but he deserved it. For an instant she thought she would cry from frustration. She had missed her chance of finding Paul at the apartment.

She went out into the cold winter evening, wondering if she would ever see him again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE HOTEL was quiet for once. Paul locked the front door, after looking up the street towards the café, and then turned down the lamp—a routine that was totally familiar, and increasingly tedious. He considered the satisfaction he would derive from locking all of his guests out, instead of in. The fact was that he no longer cared about the money. He felt horribly alone.

Rosa's body was to be delivered from the autopsist's the next day. No doubt, he thought, he and her mother would derive grim pleasure from the homecoming.

He returned to his room, took a bottle of Jack Daniels from his wardrobe closet, and poured himself a drink. His hand was steady as he tossed it back, but his guts were roiled and cold. He took his bathrobe from the closet and put it on, jerking the sash tight about his stomach. The room contained nothing else that seemed to pertain to him—the books and pictures were all Rosa's, since Paul wanted no relics—but he felt sheltered there, and reluctant to leave. Marcel had asked him up to his own room, an odd invitation. He always referred to Marcel, with bitter humour, as his wife's unaccredited lover. That made it sound somehow more hopeless, and callous. Of course he had also had his lovers—barmaids, dreary shop girls, whatever bodies came his way—mostly out of habit. But Rosa seemed to have had something else in mind. As her official lover, Paul thought he was entitled to certain privileges, among them love. How presumptuous he had been.

He knew it had taken courage for Marcel to invite him up. How many nights had Paul sat in this room, waiting and watching the green neon *Ricard* sign across the street, while Rosa was with her lover. Well, Paul told himself, if Marcel waxed sloppy and sentimental tonight, he might just have to shove Marcel's head through one of the cheap pasteboard

walls On the other hand, there was a chance Marcel could tell him something of interest

Paul climbed the stairs, and knocked on Marcel's door 'Entré' The response was polite, and immediate

Paul entered a narrow room cluttered with books and magazines, and filled with a warm glow from the lamp's crimson shade The walls were hung with Lautrec and Chagall prints, photographs of idealized natural landscapes torn from *Paris Match*, used racetrack tickets, letters, clippings and a poster of Albert Camus Marcel sat at a desk strewn with copies of *Le Monde*, *Paris-Soir*, and half a dozen other newspapers, cutting out an article with a pair of long shears He, too, wore a bathrobe

'I didn't come here to cry with you,' Paul told him

Marcel continued to ply the shears His self-control annoyed Paul

'Does it bother you if I keep working?' Marcel asked 'It distracts me after what happened'

He saw that Paul compared their bathrobes Both were of the same tartan plaid fabric

'Identical,' Marcel said, with some satisfaction 'Rosa wanted our bathrobes to be exactly alike'

Paul's irritation increased He didn't know about the bathrobes, and found them ridiculous 'You can't tell me anything I don't already know,' he said, lying He decided to take the initiative, and began to poke at a neat pile of clippings on the desk

'I was wondering why you save these Is it a job or just a hobby?'

'I don't like the word hobby,' Marcel retorted 'It's a job to round out my salary'

'Then it's serious' Paul mocked him 'It's a job that makes you read Very instructive'

'Be sincere,' Marcel said 'Didn't you know that we had identical bathrobes?'

Paul laughed, but the sound was hollow

'We have lots of things in common,' Marcel went on, but Paul interrupted him

'I know everything Rosa often told me about you '

In the presence of another man, even one as fastidious as Marcel, Paul could sentimentalize about his wife, without the feeling of impotent rage Marcel was a man, and had never been a threat, except perhaps in the way Rosa used him

'Would you like a shot of bourbon?' he asked Marcel, in a sudden impulse towards generosity He stepped to the door

'Wait ' Marcel opened a desk drawer, and took out his own bottle of Jack Daniels 'I have some of my own '

'Is that another present from Rosa?'

'I don't much care for it, but Rosa always wanted it around I've often wondered if by these details we can explain, understand together '

Paul accepted a glass of whisky

'For almost a year, Rosa and I ' Marcel stumbled over his words 'Regularly, but without passion,' he said, deciding to leave the sex act unspecified 'I thought I knew her as well as one can know one's '

'Mistress,' Paul said casually

'But a while ago something happened which I couldn't explain '

Marcel pointed to a wedge of white wall near the ceiling, where the paper had been ripped away

'Rosa climbed up on the bed,' he said, 'and tried to tear off the paper with her hands I stopped her—she was ruining her nails She did it with a strange violence I had never seen her like that '

Some realization was nagging at Paul 'Our room was painted white,' he said 'She wanted it different from the others in the hotel, to make it seem like a normal home She wanted to change it here, too, and she began with the walls '

Paul sat heavily on the bed How easy it was for someone to set up another life He thought of Jeanne, and of the fact that they did not know each other's names Was it possible that

Rosa had also created with Marcel her bleakest vision of existence? And that vision was a duplicate of her real life. For a moment Paul could not speak. He looked at Marcel with fascination.

'You must have been a good-looking man,' he said.

Marcel sat on the bed beside him. 'Not as much as you.'

'You're in good shape.' Paul patted him through the bathrobe. 'What do you do for the belly? That's where I have a problem.'

'Ah, I have a secret,' Marcel said, but he didn't finish. 'Why did Rosa betray you with me?' he asked Paul abruptly.

Paul looked into his guileless eyes. This man would never understand.

'You don't think that Rosa killed herself?' Paul asked quietly.

'It's difficult for me to believe it.'

Marcel seemed frightened by the admission. He got up and walked to the window, grasped a bar wedged high in the frame, and began to lift himself up by his arms.

'This is the secret for my stomach,' he called.

Paul just stared at him, the reconstruction of himself. Rosa had dressed him like Paul, made his favourite drink the same booze. Paul had searched for a letter from Rosa, had found nothing but her inconsequential and sometimes obscene mementoes. Now he realized that Marcel and Marcel's room were the message he sought. The banality of it all was overwhelming.

He walked to the door, and paused. 'In all sincerity,' he said to Marcel, 'I wonder what she saw in you.'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE CAVERNS of Les Halles seemed untouched by the morning sunlight, the windows up beneath the eaves draped in shadow, and backed by the darkness of an enormous, silent room. Untold thousands of animal carcasses had passed beneath that roof—Jeanne had often seen the legions of marbled meat marshalled on steel hooks—and now the building was itself doomed and scheduled for destruction. It had, she thought, viewing it from just inside the door of a shop on the Rue de la Cossonnerie, become its own funeral parlour. But she had no time for such macabre thoughts—death was something that could not touch her, especially today, when she was the focal point of the bridal shop, and dressed in antique satin, her curls piled upon her head, where she held them, the single red rose Tom had presented her clasped in one hand, turning slowly for his appraisal.

The Arriflex rested on the pavement outside, secure on its tripod, because there was no room in the tiny shop. The cameraman bent to the view-finder, concentrating, while the soundman knelt before his tape recorder, testing the microphone. Tom danced behind the camera, waiting for the filming to start, his brightly-patterned scarf trailing from his neck in a slightly self-conscious display of enthusiasm. The woman who owned the shop, recognizing the certainty of a sale, had tried to convince Jeanne to choose the more expensive wedding gown in *peau-de-soie*, but she preferred the more traditional style, though her gown was second-hand, and torn beneath one arm. The thrust of her breast was visible through the tear, firm and virginal.

She became impatient with Tom's preparations, and she wanted him to begin while she was able to suspend her own disbelief. He noticed her discomfort.

'Inspiration isn't like a light turning on,' he called

'Then what kind of a director are you?'

'You can't buy ideas like sausages!' He turned to his crew
'Are you ready? *On tourne* '

Jeanne watched Tom take the microphone, and confront the camera to make his introduction, stepping jauntily from one foot to the other. He was, she decided, as incurably romantic as herself.

'We're at Les Halles,' he began, while the camera started grinding away. 'In these old stores are dresses, dresses waving gently in the breeze—a sensation of white. They are wedding dresses.'

He waved the soundman forward, and shouted, 'Action!'

Jeanne found that Tom was kneeling before her, so as not to block the shot, and holding the mike at the level of her breasts.

'How do you see marriage?' he asked.

She felt the movement of air, knew it was not a breeze, but wind. Clouds had massed to the north. Warm air in winter, she reflected, always meant rain.

'I see it everywhere,' she said. 'Always.'

'Everywhere?' Tom asked.

'On walls, on house fronts.'

'On walls? On house fronts?'

Tom already sounded disappointed. She wondered if they really had any chance together, when she felt stifled just trying on her wedding gown.

'Yes,' she said, confronting the camera. 'On posters. And what do the posters say? What do they sell?'

'They talk about cars, canned meat, cigarettes.' Tom suggested.

'No. The subject is the young couple before marriage, without children. Then we see them after the marriage, with children. The posters are about marriage, even if they don't say so. The ideal, successful marriage isn't in the old style any more, in church, with a depressed husband and a complaining wife. Today, the advertised marriage is smiling.'

'Smiling?'

'Of course And why not take these marriages as seen in advertising seriously? It's the pop marriage '

'Pop!' For Tom it was a revelation He had never thought of marriage in those terms 'That's an idea,' he said. 'For pop youth, a pop marriage But what if the pop marriage doesn't work?'

'Fix it like a car,' Jeanne said 'The couple are like two workmen in overalls, repairing a motor '

'And in the case of adultery, what happens?' Tom pressed The shop woman completed her fitting, and stepped back, her hands raised in appreciation

'In the case of adultery,' Jeanne said, 'there are three or four workmen, instead of two '

'And love? Is love pop, too?'

Tom knelt at her feet, his head resting among the folds of *peau-de-soie* draped over the little divan He looked at Jeanne adoringly

'No,' she decided 'Love is not pop '

'If it's not pop, what is it?'

Jeanne noticed that the crew enjoyed their exchange, and she wondered if they suspected something Tom didn't Behind them, the sky grew darker

'The workmen go to a secret place,' she said 'They take off their overalls, becoming men and women again, and they make love '

Tom was delighted He jumped to his feet and cried, 'You're superb! You even look superb! '

'It's the dress that makes the bride,' Jeanne offered modestly

'You're better than Rita Hayworth,' Tom gushed, using his catalogue of film comparisons 'Better than Joan Crawford, Kim Novak, Lauren Bacall, Ava Gardner when she loved Mickey Rooney! '

These names had nothing to do with her She tried to believe in herself as a bride, but she couldn't—at least not Tom's bride, not now She wanted to tear the gown away, to be away from his childish adoration, and the eyes of the

camera, the crew and the woman who had stepped to close the door, because the rain had started

'What are you doing?' Tom called 'Stop!' He pushed the door open again, and told the cameraman to keep filming But the rain fell harder, and the script girl was the first to run for cover The cameraman took off his jacket and threw it over the Arriflex The soundman began to gather his equipment under the awning next door

'Why aren't you filming in the rain?' Tom shouted 'Why are you stopping?'

The bottom seemed to fall out of the sky Tom rushed into the street to help move the camera, as the shouts of dismay were drowned out by the pounding rain Jeanne moved cautiously towards the door, the gown gathered in her hands She had a sudden, irresistible urge to see Paul, to be secure within the circular walls of the apartment, stripped of the gown and all other obligations She hesitated, and then ran out into the downpour and up the Rue de la Cossonnerie, the rain instantly soaking her hair and the thin satin, cold but electrifying She felt like singing, and she opened her mouth to the deluge

No one but the shop owner saw Jeanne's escape The woman still stood with her mouth open when Tom slipped back into the shop, soaking wet, and confronted the empty fitting platform

'Jeanne,' he said 'Where's Jeanne?'

'I don't know,' the woman gasped 'She just jumped up, and left'

'In the rain?'

'In the rain In her wedding gown'

Together they peered out of the door The Rue de la Cossonnerie was deserted, backed by the outline of Les Halles, obscured by the rain

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PAUL stood in the shelter of the railway bridge, looking up past the petals of blue-grey iron supporting the Metro, at the rain-water blowing from the arches out over the river. He held his overcoat about him, not because he was cold or wet—he had gained the bridge before the rain broke—but because he liked the feeling of strict containment. His hair had not been combed that morning, and the encroaching bald spot was more apparent. He seemed older than before, and more vulnerable. Today Rosa was to be brought to the room her mother had so carefully prepared for her, and Paul was on his way to another room, to meet another body that was very much alive, if nameless and without other significance for him. It occurred to him that the situation wasn't without humour, but he didn't laugh.

At that moment, a taxi stopped on the Rue Jules Verne, and Jeanne stepped out. She was completely soaked, and seemed almost naked. The thin satin had become transparent, assuming the colour of her flesh, and it clung provocatively to the contours of her breasts and buttocks, and exposed even the dark patch of pubic hair. Her curls were plastered to her face with rain. The cab driver stared at her with dumb appreciation, as she ran across the pavement and into the apartment building.

The rain slackened, and Paul dashed from his cover, bound for the Rue Jules Verne.

It was strange that they approached the same point in time from such different circumstances, Paul coming from a scene of violent death and mourning, and Jeanne from a celebration of life and love.

Jeanne hadn't brought her key, and she rushed to the concierge's widow. The woman sat with her back to the foyer. 'I beg your pardon,' Jeanne said, raising her voice to be heard.

over the tattoo of driving rain, but the woman didn't turn around. A clap of thunder shook the building. Jeanne backed away from the window, and sat on the wooden bench next to the elevator. She hugged her body, shivering.

It was there Paul saw her, and he experienced a new elation, knowing that she had come to him in such haste and abandon. The sound of his footsteps aroused her, but when Jeanne looked up expectantly, Paul passed her without a word, and stepped into the elevator. They confronted each other through the elaborate scrollwork.

'Forgive me,' Jeanne said. 'Do you still want me?'

Paul didn't know why he should forgive her, and didn't care. He simply nodded his head, and swung open the elevator door.

'*J'ai voulu te quitter, j'ai pas pu,*' she said in a rush, and then remembered that he preferred English. 'I wanted to leave you, but I couldn't. I can't!'

Paul said nothing. He gazed at her body—the dark circles of her nipples beneath the wet material, the outline of her narrow hips, the fullness of her thighs. Even the soft down of her legs showed through the satin, as if it were a second skin.

The elevator began to rise.

'I wanted to leave,' she said again. 'Do you understand?'

Still Paul didn't speak, his eyes moving up and down over her body. Jeanne began to raise the hem of the gown, leaning back against the cage, watching his face for signs of pleasure. Her calves and knees were revealed, then her thighs, then her pubic hair. She paused, then raised the gown higher, displaying a child's navel.

The elevator rose higher.

'What else do you want from me?' she asked, grateful and exposed.

He might not have heard. Her words meant nothing, compared with her presence. He moved his hand forward, and slipped his fingers between her legs, where she was moist and warm. She hesitated, then reached across and unfastened his trousers, and moved her hand among the maze of his clothing.

until she held him, firmly and unequivocally. Their arms formed a cross.

The elevator sighed as it reached its destination.

'*Voilà*' shouted Paul, swinging open the door of the apartment. He began to sing, 'There once was a man, and he had an old sow',

Rain poured through the open window in the circular room, and he slammed it shut, and turned towards her with a theatrical bow. Jeanne stood in the middle of the floor, shivering and laughing.

'You know, you're wet,' he said, and he took her in his arms. The soaked gown was slick as ice, and her hair left a damp impression on his chest. He went into the bathroom for a towel.

Jeanne felt like a celebration. She was now his bride, and this was their honeymoon, and she turned around in the middle of the floor—just as she had the first day—and then threw herself down on the mattress. She hugged the pillow like any excited schoolgirl, and turned expectantly towards the door, waiting for Paul to reappear. It was then that her hand touched something damp behind the pillow. Jeanne sat up, and jerked the pillow away. A dead rat lay on the sheet, blood dried about its mouth, its fur matted and wet.

She began to scream.

Paul arrived with the towel, which he dropped in her lap.

'A rat,' he said matter-of-factly, but she clung to him, whimpering.

'It's only a rat,' he repeated, amused by her irrational fear. 'There are more rats in Paris than people.'

Paul reached down, and picked the rat up by its tail, letting its head dangle before his face. Jeanne gasped and backed away. She was terrified and sickened by the sight and the touch of it, and she watched in disgust as Paul raised the carcass and opened his own mouth.

'Yum, yum, yum,' he said, smacking his lips.

'I want to go,' she stammered.

'Hey, wait Don't you want a bite first Don't you want something to eat?'

His cruelty was as exhausting as it was sudden

'This is the end,' she said

'No, this is the end,' he joked, pointing at the tail 'But I like to start with the head, that's the best part Now are you sure you won't have any? Okay'

He lowered the rat's head to within an inch of his mouth She turned away in horror

'What's the matter?' he asked, needling her 'Don't you dig rats?'

'I want to go I can't make love in this bed any more, I can't It's disgusting, nauseating' She shivered

'Well,' he said, 'we'll fuck on the radiator, or standing on the mantle'

He turned towards the kitchen 'Listen,' he called, dangling the rat 'I've got to get some mayonnaise for this, because it really is good with mayonnaise I'll save the asshole for you'

He went into the kitchen, laughing loudly 'Rat's asshole with mayonnaise!'

'I want to leave, I want to get out of here,' she shouted, unable to look even at the bed How quickly the mood had changed there was no predicting what he might do next The desire she felt for him, and her own burgeoning passion, had evaporated at the touch of that dead, matted fur For the first time she saw the room in all its sordidness The odour of sex now reminded her of death Her own audacity at being there frightened her

'I can't take it any more,' she mumbled to herself 'I'm going away, I'm never coming back Never'

She turned to go, just as Paul returned He had disposed of the rat

'*Quo vadis*, baby?' he asked playfully He moved ahead of her into the hall, and bolted the front door Jeanne looked at him with combined disgust and gratitude She didn't really want to leave

'Someone did it on purpose,' she said, looking at Paul suspiciously 'I can feel it It's a warning—it's the end '

'You're crazy '

'I should have told you right away ' She wanted to challenge that overweening masculine assurance 'I've fallen in love with someone '

'Oh, isn't that wonderful,' Paul said mockingly He stepped forward and ran his hands over the smooth material of her gown, probing her as he might a ripe avocado 'You know, you're going to have to get out of these wet duds '

'I'm going to make love with him,' she insisted

Paul ignored her 'First you have to take a hot bath, 'cause if you don't, you're going to get pneumonia Right?'

He gently led Jeanne into the bathroom, and stooped to turn on both taps full force Then he took the hem of her gown, and began slowly to lift it, revealing her as she had revealed herself in the elevator

'You get pneumonia,' he said 'And then you know what happens? You die.'

Jeanne raised her arms, and Paul pulled the gown over her head, and discarded it behind him

'And then you know what happens?'

She stood before him, naked, shaking her head

'I get to fuck the dead rat! ' he said

'Ohhh,' she moaned, burying her face in her hands She knew he would never let her forget it

Paul began to sing again He rolled up his sleeves, then took Jeanne by the arm and led her gently into the tub The water was beautifully warm She sat in it, slowly, feeling the chill and the anxiety draining out of her Paul perched on the edge of the tub

'Give me the soap,' he said

He grasped her ankle, and raised her foot until it was on a level with his face Slowly he began to soap her toes, the arch of her foot, then her calf She was surprised at the softness of his touch She felt that her limbs were made of elastic,

as the steam rose between them, giving her skin a warm glow

'I'm in love,' she repeated

Paul did not want to hear it. He ran his soapy hand down the inside of her thigh until it could go no farther. There he began to work up a lather.

'You're in love,' he said with mock enthusiasm. 'How delightful!'

'I'm in love,' she insisted, and began to moan. His hand was relentless, and she rested her head against the enamel, and closed her eyes.

'I'm in love, do you understand?' She gasped, but continued. 'You know, you are old. And you're getting fat.'

Paul released her leg, and it fell heavily into the water.

'Fat, is it? How unkind.'

He soaped her neck and shoulders, moved his hand down towards her breasts. Jeanne was determined to make him take her seriously. She also felt an advantage that was new to her. She looked at him closely, and realized that what she was saying was true.

'Half your hair is out,' she said, 'and the other half is nearly white.'

Paul smiled down at her, though her words angered him. He soaped her breasts, then cupped one in his hand, and regarded its magnitude critically.

'You know,' he said, 'in ten years you're going to be playing soccer with your tits. What do you think about that?'

Jeanne just raised her other leg, and Paul dutifully washed that one, too.

'And you know what I'm going to be doing?' he asked, his hand sliding downward again, along the soft, slick skin of her inner thigh.

'You'll be in a wheelchair,' Jeanne said, gasping when his fingers touched her clitoris.

'Well, maybe. But I think I'll be smirking and giggling all the way to eternity.'

He released her leg, but Jeanne kept it thrust into the air.
'How poetic But please, before you get up, wash my foot'
'*Noblesse oblige*'

He kissed her foot, and then applied the soap
'You know,' Jeanne went on, 'he and I, we make love'
'Oh, really' Paul laughed aloud, amused by the idea of
being taunted by such a revelation 'That's wonderful Is he
a good fucker?'

'Magnificent!'

Her defiance lacked conviction. Paul, however, felt his
satisfaction grow Surely she must have another lover, but she
kept returning to him for what he thought was an obvious
reason

'You know, you're a jerk,' he said 'The best fucking you're
going to get is right here in this apartment Now stand up'

She obeyed, allowing him to turn her around His hands
buoyed by the suds, skated over her back and buttocks Paul
resembled a father washing his child, his trousers splattered
with water, intent and somewhat inexperienced

Jeanne said, 'He's full of mysteries'

That idea vaguely annoyed Paul He wondered how long
he would allow her to go on, and in what way he would bring
her down

'Listen, you dumb dodo,' he said 'All the mysteries that
you're ever going to find in life are right here'

'He is like everybody' Her voice became dreamy. 'But at
the same time, he's different'

'Like everybody, but different?' Paul played the game

'You know, he even frightens me'

'What is he? A local pimp?'

Jeanne laughed in spite of herself 'He could be He looks
it'

She stepped from the tub, and wrapped herself in the bulky
bath towel Paul stared at his soapy hands.

'Do you know why I'm in love with him?'

'I can't wait,' he said sarcastically

'Because he knows ' She paused, uncertain that she wanted the responsibility ' because he knows how to make me fall in love with him '

Paul felt his annoyance bloom into anger 'And you want this man that you love to protect you, and take care of you?'

'Yes'

'You want this gold and shining, powerful warrior to build you a fortress that you can hide in '

He stood up, his voice rising with his weight He looked down at her contemptuously

' . so you don't ever have to feel afraid, so you don't have to feel lonely You don't ever want to feel empty—that's what you want, isn't it?'

'Yes,' she said

'Well, you'll never find him '

'But I have found this man!'

Paul wanted to hit her, to make her see the stupidity of her assertion He felt a rush of jealousy She had violated the pact, she had made the outside world seem real for the first time He had to violate her in some new way

'Well,' he said, 'it won't be long until he'll want you to build a fortress for him out of your tits, and out of your cunt, and out of your smile '

Love was an excuse for feeding upon another for the nourishment of one's own self, Paul thought The only true way to love was to use another person without making excuses

'Out of your smile,' he continued, 'he'll construct some place where he can feel comfortable enough, secure enough, so that he can worship in front of the altar of his own prick '

Jeanne stood watching him with fascination, the towel wrapped tightly about her His words frightened her, and filled her with fresh desire

'I have found this man,' she repeated

'No!' he shouted, denying the possibility 'You're alone! You're all alone And you won't be able to be free of that feeling of being alone until you look death right in the face '

Paul glanced down at the pair of scissors lying on the sink, and his hand moved involuntarily towards them. It would be so easy—her himself, then nothing but blood. He had been there before, he told himself. He thought of Rosa's body being trundled up the stairs by a pair of ghouls from the autopsist's. A wave of nausea swept over him.

'I know this sounds like bullshit,' he said, 'some romantic crap. But until you go right up into the ass of death—right up his ass—and feel the womb of fear, then maybe, just maybe you'll be able to find him.'

'But I've already found him,' Jeanne said, and her voice was unsteady. 'He's you. You're that man!'

Paul shuddered and braced himself against the wall. She had tricked him, she had taken too great a chance. All the time she had been talking about him. He had to pay her back. He would show her what despair was.

'Give me the scissors,' he said.

'What?' Jeanne was afraid.

'Give me the fingernail scissors.'

She picked them up from the sink, and passed them to him. Paul caught her by the wrist, and held her hand up to her face.

'I want you to cut the fingernails on your right hand,' he told her, but she just looked at him in bafflement.

'These two,' he added, pointing. Jeanne took the scissors and carefully trimmed the nails on her middle finger and her forefinger. She replaced the scissors on the edge of the sink, rather than offering them to Paul. He began to unfasten his trousers, his eyes never leaving hers. The trousers and his underpants fell about his ankles, revealing his genitals and his muscular, hairy thighs. Paul abruptly turned his back on her, and placed both hands on the wall above the toilet.

'Now,' he said, 'I want you to put your fingers up my ass.'

'Quoi?' Jeanne couldn't believe what she heard.

'Put your fingers up my ass! Are you deaf?'

Tentatively she began to explore him. She marvelled at his

ability to shock her, to push her beyond anything she had imagined. She knew now that the affair could end horribly, in some random act of violence, but she was no longer afraid. Something in the depths of his revealed despair moved her and excited her, carrying her with him. She was willing, even if it meant pushing him farther towards his own disintegration.

She paused, afraid that she was hurting him.

'Go on!' he commanded, and she thrust her fingers deeper.

Paul felt the searing pain. She had passed the first test. He pushed her further.

'I'm going to get a pig,' he told her, gasping, 'and I'm going to have that pig fuck you. And I want the pig to vomit in your face. And I want you to swallow the vomit. Are you going to do that for me?'

'Yes,' Jeanne said, feeling the momentum of his breathing. She closed her eyes, and probed deeper. She began to cry.

'What?'

'Yes!' she answered, going with him now, her head resting against his broad back. There was no escaping. The room held them like a cell, turned them inward on their own passion and degradation. She shared his extreme and lonely ground gratefully. She would agree to anything, do anything.

'And I want the pig to die,' Paul went on, breathing heavier, his eyes clamped shut, his face raised in what might have been a benediction. They laboured as closely together as they ever had.

'I want the pig to die while you're fucking him. And then you have to go behind, and I want you to smell the dying farts of the pig. Are you going to do all that for me?'

'Yes,' she cried, her other arm about his neck, her face pressed between his shoulders. 'Yes, and more than that. And worse, worse than before, much worse.'

Paul came. She had opened herself completely and proved her love. There was no place else to go.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

IT WAS LATE, and the hush that had settled in the hotel corridors was disturbed only by the sound of slow, steady footsteps. Paul turned from the stairs and entered a narrow hallway. He felt that he was the guardian of a labyrinth, turning corners, moving in and out of shadows, without will or purpose. He paused in a corner of darkness, and listened: there was no sound other than his breathing. He raised a corner of the wallpaper, revealing a peephole into that guest's room, and he put his eye to it, and saw the prostitute asleep, alone in a mass of covers, one white leg thrust into view, dark mascara sealing her eyes shut.

Paul moved on. He opened the linen closet at the end of the corridor, which provided a secret view of the Algerian couple on one side, and the American deserter on the other. The bodies were lost in sleep, seemed to fall apart in unconsciousness, their eyelids to be made of soft stone. He moved on to other peepholes, hidden in innocent-looking designs on the wallpaper, in corners and crevices. The hotel reminded him of a spider's web where nothing was secret, nothing inviolate. He checked on all his slumbering guests, but it wasn't people he saw, only slack mouths in uncontrolled grimaces, parched lips of bodies that seemed the negation of flesh. He heard only rasping breath, and an occasional invocation called out in sleep. Paul felt he was identifying bodies on slabs in the morgue.

Paul took out a key, and unlocked the door of Rosa's room. The odour of flowers was immediate and overwhelming. The lamp on the bedside table remained lit. Her body lay on a bier of sickly, sweet-scented flowers. She wore what looked like a wedding gown, complete with fine, white lace and a veil. Her blonde hair had been carefully set, and her cheeks and lips heavily rouged. False eyelashes gave her, in death, the look of

someone precisely and demurely asleep Her slim fingers were folded on her stomach, and the skin of her hands and face had a glossy luminescence Only her expression was right—a barely perceptible and ironic smile

Paul sat heavily in the bedside chair, and fished the last cigarette from a packet of Gauloises He crumpled the paper and tossed it aside, and lit his cigarette without satisfaction

‘I just made the rounds,’ he said, without looking at Rosa The door was locked, and it gave him some pleasure to speak to his dead wife It was a way of ordering his own mind ‘I haven’t done it for a long time Everything’s fine, calm The walls are like Swiss cheese in this place’

He looked around, at the walls and ceiling of the sad little room, trying to hold back his anger and grief Finally he confronted her face

‘You look ridiculous in that make-up,’ he said ‘Like the caricature of a whore—a little touch of Mommy in the night Fake Ophelia drowned in the bathtub’

He shook his head His attempted chuckle sounded more like a gasp Rosa was so still, so final

‘I wish you could see yourself You’d really laugh’

That was one thing Rosa had, a sense of humour Distorted humour, maybe, and occasionally cruel, but she could laugh It seemed irreverent to dress her up like that, and false The truth was that Paul couldn’t say he would have recognized such a woman on the street as his wife

‘You’re your mother’s masterpiece,’ he said bitterly, fanning the smoke from before his face ‘Christ, there are too many fucking flowers in this place I can’t breathe’

There were even tiny flowers set in her hair He ground out his cigarette on the rug, beneath his heel

There were some things he had to say, or he knew he would go mad

‘You know, on top of the closet, in that cardboard valise, I found all your little goodies Pens, key chains, foreign money, French ticklers—the whole lot Even a clergyman’s

collar I didn't know you liked to collect all those little knick-knacks the guests left behind . '

There were many things he didn't know, and would never know It seemed so unfair, and so hopeless

'Even if the husband lives two hundred fucking years,' he said, in sorrow and anger, 'he's never going to be able to discover his wife's true nature I mean, I might be able to comprehend the universe, but I'll never discover the truth about you—never I mean, who the hell were you?'

For an instant he actually expected Rosa to respond He waited, listening to the vast silence of the hotel It was the middle of the night all over the world, everywhere Paul felt he was the only thing awake in the universe

'Remember that day,' he asked, trying to smile, 'the first day I was here? I knew that I couldn't get into your pants unless I said . '

He paused, trying to recall their first meeting five years ago Rosa seemed so proper, so distant, and yet he knew He was proud, because he thought he had really made a conquest, that they understood each other

'What did I say? Oh, yes—"May I have my bill, please? I have to leave" Remember?'

This time his laugh was genuine Yes, Rosa had fallen for that ploy, she was afraid he might escape, when he had no intention of leaving The hotel was cleaner then, and he remembered that he had chosen it for that reason How oddly things turned out

Paul felt a sudden need to confess 'Last night I ripped off the lights on your mother, and the whole joint went bananas All your your guests, as you used to call them I guess that includes me, doesn't it?' The anger returned 'It does include me, doesn't it? For five years I was more of a guest in this fucking flophouse than a husband With privileges, of course And then to help me understand you, you let me inherit Marcel The husband's double, whose room was the double of ours '

He felt jealous, genuinely jealous, not for what she and Marcel did together, but because he did not know what they did. There were certain things he was entitled to as a husband, even if just a titular one. She should have told him before dispatching herself—a simple courtesy. But of course he was also afraid to know.

‘And you know what?’ he said, ‘I didn’t even have the guts to ask him if the same numbers that you and I did were the same numbers you did with him. Our marriage was nothing more than a foxhole for you. And all it took for you to get out was a thirty-five cent razor, and a tub full of water.’

Paul staggered to his feet. He felt a wave of sorrow and rage and frustration break over him. She had no right to leave him like that, her departure was worse than an obscene joke, and one played at his expense.

‘You cheap, goddamn, fucking, God-forsaken whore!’ He spat out the words, upsetting some of the flowers as he moved closer to the bed. ‘I hope you rot in hell!’ You’re worse than the dirtiest street pig that anybody could ever find, anywhere. And you know why? Because you lied. You lied to me, and I trusted you. You lied! You knew you were lying.’

His hands were deep in his jacket pockets, and his fingers touched something unfamiliar. Slowly he drew out a small photograph. Paul held it up to the light. It was the photo of Jeanne, her full breasts bared to the camera. Paul stared at the photograph as if he didn’t recognize her. She must have slipped it into his pocket earlier, he thought. They were all the same, he told himself, tearing the photograph into tiny pieces, and scattering them among the flowers. He must live, and that was something else Rosa hadn’t understood, or cared about.

‘Go on, tell me you didn’t lie.’ He moved his face close to Rosa’s, caught a slight medicinal odour amidst that of the flowers. ‘Haven’t you got anything to say about that? You can think up something, can’t you? Go on, tell me. Go on, smile, you cunt.’

He watched her lips expectantly. They seemed to be made of tallow.

'Go on,' he encouraged, 'tell me something sweet. Smile at me, and say I just misunderstood.'

Tears collected in Paul's eyes, and began to trail down his cheeks. He passed the back of his hand across his face, then leaned closer to the body. He wasn't giving up so easily.

'Go on, tell me, you pig-fucker! You goddamn fucking pig-fucking liar!'

He began to sob, his body wracked by heaves. He braced himself against the chair, and reached out to touch her face. It was cold and unyielding. He began to pluck the blossoms from her hair, and drop them on the floor about his feet.

'I'm sorry,' he said, sniffing, 'but I just can't stand it—seeing these goddamn leaves in your face. You never wore make-up—all this fucking shit.'

As delicately as possible, he pulled the false eyelashes away, and discarded them. But the effect was still phoney and out of character.

Paul moved to the sink, where he wet his handkerchief beneath the tap. Then he began to wipe away the powder and rouge from Rosa's face.

'I'm going to take this lipstick off your mouth. I'm sorry, but I have to.'

He stepped back, and looked down at her again. He felt affection, and a compelling need to explain his despair.

'I don't know why you did it,' he began. 'I'd do it, too, if I knew how. I just don't know.'

He paused, and considered suicide. Perhaps he was not the type, but neither was Rosa. Paul spoke to himself. 'I have to find a way.'

Paul knelt beside the bed and rested his head and arm on Rosa's body. He was about to speak again, to lose himself in the wash of his own sentimentality. He had never loved Rosa as much in life as he did in death, he had never been able to see the value of things and people until they were gone. This

realization didn't make his pain any less. For once he was stranded without even his own bitter sense of the absurd.

Someone was pounding on the front door. The blows echoed through the hotel like the approach of doom, and for a moment he was afraid. Then the bell began to ring—a brittle, insistent sound.

He half-called, half-mumbled, 'What? All right, I'm coming,' and stumbled to his feet. He turned back to look at Rosa, and he felt only affection, for it seemed that he had made some tentative arrangement with his memory of her.

'I have to go, sweetheart,' he said. 'Baby, someone's calling me.'

He smiled down at her frozen features a last time, and then stepped into the hall, locking the door behind him.

A muffled woman's voice carried up from the street. 'Hello. Is anyone there?'

Paul felt that he had just wakened from a deep sleep. 'I'm coming,' he called thickly, and made his way down the stairs to the lobby.

Two shadows stood massed against the frosted glass. Paul didn't turn on the light in the foyer, but went directly to the door. A man and a woman stood huddled together on the threshold of the hotel. He couldn't make out their faces.

'Hurry up!' the woman called, catching a glimpse of Paul in the glow from the street lamp, but he didn't move to unlock the door.

'Wake up!' the woman said, knocking loudly, then pressing her face against the glass. 'Open this door!'

'It's late,' Paul told her. 'It's four a.m.'

He didn't recognize the woman's voice, or the heavily made-up eye that peered in at him.

'I need the usual room,' she said. 'Number Four. Half an hour will do, or maybe an hour at the most.'

Paul shook his head. Why, he wondered, was this woman bothering him? She seemed familiar with the hotel.

'No, indeed,' she insisted. 'When you're full, you put out a

sign I know I'm tired of arguing Call the owner Move it!
The owner's always been helpful to me'

Paul unlocked the door, and opened it slightly He saw a heavy middle-aged prostitute with blue wings of make-up over her eyes Behind her stood a man in an overcoat, looking anxiously up and down the street, afraid of being seen

'Rosa and me, we're old friends,' the woman said 'Now open up Let me in, if you don't want me to tell her'

While she spoke, the man backed cautiously away, and then turned and walked away without the woman seeing Paul opened the door for her, and she pushed her way inside quickly

'Everything's fine,' she said, turning '*Entré*'

She saw the man was gone, and turned angrily on Paul 'Are you happy? He left me'

'I'm sorry,' Paul said He felt that he was participating in a dream, that he and the others weren't real The possibility that he might have slighted one of Rosa's friends filled him with more sentimental remorse The woman seemed to want something of him, but he didn't understand exactly what, even as she pushed him towards the door

'Hurry up and catch him,' she said, bringing her face close to his Paul couldn't see her clearly, but he smelled the stale, sweet odour like that of wilted flowers 'He can't have gone far Bring him back here Tell him that it's all right'

Paul dashed out into the street The light of dawn was just breaking, and he felt tired and confused Perhaps he should do what the woman asked The man must have agreed to go with her, he thought It was only fair that he come back, and that Paul help convince him

He trotted up the street, the cold morning air filling his lungs Just moments before he had been mourning his wife, and now he was running an errand for a whore, pumping for his dead wife's memory The remorse he felt began to drain away, and he felt the stirrings of the old anger Perhaps this was another of Rosa's jokes, which seemed to lurk for him

wherever he turned. He wondered vaguely why it was that prostitutes were so fond of Rosa.

The man in the dark overcoat was nowhere in sight. Paul stopped to catch his breath. He stood listening to the sound of trucks carrying produce through the narrow streets, smelling the damp odour of garbage set in the alley next to him. He felt he was living the ultimate indignity, and there was no one to blame, not even himself. That would have at least been some satisfaction, some way to placate his rage.

He clenched his fists, and turned back towards the hotel, the prostitute forgotten. But then in the alley he saw the man in the overcoat, trying to hide in a darkened doorway. His cowardice disgusted Paul. Why had this man agreed to go with the woman, and then refused, causing Paul trouble?

'So you've found me,' the man said, trying to laugh. He was thin and delicate-looking, with a melodious, actor's voice. 'Please, don't tell her that you found me. Did you see how ugly she is?'

He backed away from Paul, his hands outstretched beseechingly.

'Once my wife was enough for me,' he said, 'but now she's got a disease that gives her skin like a snake. Put yourself in my place.'

Paul took him by the arm. 'Come on,' he said. Somehow the man's story further enraged him.

'I was drunk,' he pleaded. 'I took the first one I could find, then we had to walk a bit, and I sobered up.'

He tried to pull away, and with sudden, unreasonable fury Paul slammed him with brute force against the metal door of the butcher's shop.

He fell in the filthy street, and began to crawl backwards to escape Paul.

'Leave me alone,' he cried. 'You're crazy! Leave me alone!' He tried to stand and Paul kicked him, propelling him forward across the slick cobblestones.

'Now get the fuck out of here,' Paul said. 'Faggot!'

The man ran on, limping slightly, glancing in terror over his shoulder

Paul returned slowly to the hotel, exhausted. How quickly he had descended from the adoration of his wife to the sordid mechanics of his everyday existence.

The woman was waiting in the foyer, seated on the bench and smoking a cigarette. The bright red coal glowed in the shadows.

'I knew it,' she said. 'You couldn't get him back. Where am I going to find another one, at this hour?'

'How much did I make you lose?' He began to search his pockets.

The woman laughed. 'Give me what you can. I don't do it for the money. I like it, understand? I do it because I like men.'

She put her hand on Paul's.

'You know, you're cute,' she said huskily. 'If you want, we can do it here. I'm wearing a practical dress, with a first-rate zipper. It opens all the way—I don't even need to take it off. Come on, don't be shy.'

She leaned forward into the light, and Paul saw what he thought was a death mask. He drew back, dazed and afraid, and began to move away from her.

'Don't look at me like that!' She stepped to the door. Before going out, she said, 'I'm not young any more. So what? Your wife will be just like me one day.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

JEANNE wondered if Paul would be waiting, and what surprise lay in store for her as she ascended in the elevator for what she thought would be the last time. It seemed to her that there was nothing more to gain, that they had passed the last frontier.

together But for her the adventure continued, though she knew that its dangers had somehow increased

She stepped out of the cage, and unlocked the door with her own key She wondered if Paul had discovered the photograph she had dropped into the pocket of his jacket It was her way of making him think about her, and she liked to think of him looking at it over his morning coffee, or while involved in the mysterious activities of his private life

The memory of the dead rat returned, and she opened the door cautiously Silence greeted her, and the glow of sunlight against the circular wall She caught her breath at the sight of the empty rooms The furniture was gone She moved quickly from room to room, confirming what she had difficulty believing, but the apartment looked just as it did that first day Even the mattress was gone

The walls seemed even barer than before, the dark impressions left by paintings more forlorn Only the odour of their encounters remained, and already that was becoming part of the larger redolence of decline

She ran out, leaving the door open behind her, and rode the elevator back down into the gloomy foyer The concierge's window stood open, and Jeanne could see the woman's broad back as she bent over her obscure pastimes Jeanne stepped up behind her, and loudly cleared her throat, but the woman remained oblivious She hummed an aria from Verdi It sounded more like an extended moan

'Excuse me,' Jeanne said, 'do you remember the man in Number Four?' Jeanne's words seemed to echo through the building, and she remembered the first day she had come, and the frustration she had felt trying to gain entrance The black woman still held her secrets, and she shook her head without even turning around.

'He's been living here for several days,' Jeanne prompted

'I don't know anyone, I tell you,' the woman said 'They rent, they sublet The man in Number Four, the woman in Number One What do I know?'

Jeanne couldn't believe that Paul had simply moved out. She had expected some surprise, but of course not this one.

'And the furniture,' she said. 'Where'd he take it? The apartment is empty.'

The woman laughed derisively, as if she had heard it too many times before.

'Where do you send his mail?' Jeanne asked. 'Give me the address.'

'I don't have his address. I don't know anyone.'

She was incredulous. 'Not even his name?'

'Nothing, *mam'zelle*.' She turned her head, hostile now. Jeanne was pushing the guardian of this netherworld too far. After all, Jeanne had entered at her own risk, and she ran towards the door with the enthusiasm of a new idea. If he had left, then the apartment was free once again. It would be a kind of vengeance, she thought, walking down the pavement towards the café, and one that he deserved. He could have told her he was leaving, he could at least have left a message. It seemed impossible that she would never see him again, but she realized—quite suddenly—that she never would.

Her enthusiasm had waned by the time she reached the telephone. She dialled Tom's number.

'I've found an apartment for us,' she told him. 'Number Three, on the Rue Jules Verne. Come right away. You understand where it is?' 'I'll wait for you on the fifth floor.'

She returned and waited in the foyer until she heard the clamour of Tom and his crew packing into the elevator. Those who couldn't fit raced up the stairs, laughing and shouting at the passengers inside. The whole building seemed transformed by the noise and the sudden effusion of life. She welcomed them in with a smile and a bow.

'You like our apartment?' she asked Tom, as he swept in followed by the crew and their jumble of equipment. The cameraman immediately began to set the Arriflex up in the circular room, and Jeanne felt a slight pang of regret, but that

was soon forgotten Tom moved through the empty rooms like an emperor

'Are you happy?' he asked her, in passing The cameraman began to film, oblivious of his surroundings 'There's lots of light,' Tom added, without waiting for an answer

Jeanne led him to the small room 'This one's too little for a big bed, but maybe it's all right for a baby Fidel—that would be a nice name for a kid Like Fidel Castro'

'But I want a daughter, too,' Tom said, and she felt a sudden rush of affection for him He was so understanding, no matter what she did She thought of Paul again, and missed the urgency the rooms had once contained Jeanne felt a sense of complacency unknown before to her in that apartment For the first time she could imagine some family living there—their games and their quarrels and their petty advances She felt infinitely sad

'Rosa,' said Tom, ignorant of her conflicting emotions 'Like Rosa Luxembourg She's not as well known, but she wasn't bad in her time What's the matter?'

'Nothing'

'Good Then I'll ask some questions for the film Let's talk about something that interests everybody—sex'

Tom had planned to shock her with that line, while the camera focused upon her, but she was obviously bored, and disappointed He turned to the crew, and said, 'Cut! It's not possible, no more shooting'

They began to gather up their equipment Without another word, Tom ushered them out The script girl waved shyly to Jeanne, as she followed the others on to the landing, and shut the door softly behind her

'I wanted to film you every day,' Tom said, humbly 'In the morning when you wake up, then when you fall asleep When you smile the first time And I didn't film anything'

Jeanne turned and moved away from him through the vast, empty rooms Tom followed, gazing doubtfully at the pile of

old furniture draped in the sheet, the cracks and water marks on the walls, the broken moulding

'Today we stopped shooting,' he said 'The film is finished'

Jeanne was touched by remorse 'I don't like things that finish'

'One must begin something else right away' Tom turned around in the circular room to which they had returned, his hands raised in appreciation 'But it's huge'

'Where are you?' called Jeanne, from the small room She moved reluctantly back towards the arena

'I'm here,' he said 'It's too large You could get lost'

'Oh, stop it' Jeanne didn't feel equal to his enthusiasm 'Now don't start'

'How did you find this apartment?'

'By chance,' she said irritably

'We'll change everything!'

His words had a certain appeal to her Was it really possible to change anything? 'Everything,' she said 'We'll change chance to fate'

Tom ran towards the adjoining room, his arms outspread 'Come on, Jeanne!' he called 'Take off! You're in heaven Dive, make three turns, descend What's happening to me? An air pocket?'

He leaned comically against the wall, where his flight had taken him

'What's happening?' Jeanne asked, laughing in spite of herself

'Enough of these turbulent zones We can't act like this,' he added, serious 'We can't joke like children—we're adults'

'Adults? But that's terrible'

'Yes, it is terrible.'

'Then how must we act?'

'I don't know,' he admitted 'Invent gestures, words For example, one thing I do know, adults are serious, logical, circumspect, hairy'

'Oh, yes,' said Jeanne, remembering Paul again

'They face all problems'

Tom knelt on the floor, and took Jeanne's hand in his, pulling her down to him

'I think I understand you,' he said softly 'You want a lover more than you want a husband You know, I could propose something different You marry who you want, and I'll be the one who carries you away with passion. The lover'

He smiled at her affectionately Jeanne lay down on the floor, and began to pull him towards her

'Come on,' she coaxed 'This is our home now'

But Tom resisted Jeanne's willingness he found slightly annoying, since he didn't like making love in strange rooms He wasn't prepared, he told himself Besides, the room had an unpleasant odour he couldn't quite identify He stood, and zipped up his leather jacket

'This apartment is not for us,' he said 'Absolutely not'

He turned towards the door, leaving her to stand unassisted He felt claustrophobic, and wanted to get out

'Where are you going?' she asked

'To look for another apartment'

'Another like what?' She marvelled at his instincts

'One we can live in'

'But we can live here'

'I find this place sad,' he said 'It smells Are you coming with me?'

Jeanne was reluctant to leave She listened to his jaunty footsteps going down the hall How different they sounded from the methodical progress of Paul

'I have to close the windows,' she said, 'and give back the keys, and make sure everything is in order'

'All right,' he called 'I'll see you later'

They said goodbye simultaneously, and then she heard him going quickly down the stairs Jeanne walked slowly to the window, and began to pull down the shutters She turned and surveyed the room The shadows had taken over, reducing the golden-red glow of the walls to smouldering brown The cracks

seemed larger and more threatening of collapse, the smell was definitely one of decay

She walked along the corridor. The small room had lost its charm, and seemed cramped and airless, unsuitable for a child or anyone else. She swung open the door into the bathroom, and felt a chill, in spite of the light from the window above the tub. The sinks were dirty, and for the first time she noticed that chips of gilt were falling from the mirror frame, dusting the cold tile floor with faded gold.

Jeanne felt a sudden, powerful urge to leave. Something threatened her there, and she turned and ran back down the corridor and into the hall. She flung open the door, stepped out on to the landing, and then shut it again without even a last look.

It seemed like an eternity since she had first come to that dank building. The concierge's window was still open when she stepped off the elevator, but the woman had disappeared. Jeanne was shocked by the idea that she could actually move, she seemed so obese, and she left the key on the counter. It never occurred to her to leave a note. As she was going out, she heard the door next to the elevator open, and glanced back to see the emaciated hand place another empty bottle on the tiles.

The Rue Jules Verne was unchanged. Workers had never once mounted the scaffolding, the cars seemed permanently parked, the street clean and devoid of people. She hurried past the café and crossed the street, leaving the familiar scene behind. A great feeling of relief came over her, mixed with sadness. She only wanted to get away.

The elevated railway bridge stood before her, and above spread the limpid blue winter sky. Sunlight patterned the walkway of the bridge. With her hands deep in the pockets of her suede coat, and her head down, Jeanne began to cross the Seine, without thinking what might lie ahead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

PAUL had buried his wife, and removed the furniture from the apartment on the Rue Jules Verne, and he felt cleansed. For the first time since Rosa's suicide, that fact did not weigh heavily on his mind. In fact, he experienced a lightness of spirit and a grudging optimism that he hadn't known in years. The crazy angles of the Paris skyline, the bone-white branches of the sycamores lining the Seine, the rhythm of the passing Metro, the freshness of the breeze—all these seemed pleasant and unique things to be appreciated, things that could matter in his own life. And the sight of a girl in a white maxi-coat, her face downturned and set in white fox fur, moving towards him with measured steps, was an affirmation that couldn't be denied.

Jeanne was oblivious to her surroundings, except that the clash of the passing train and the people about her constituted minor irritations. She thought of nothing but the blandness of her own life, and the futility of human relationships. The man who stopped beside her, turned and fell into step with her, was simply an inconvenience to be ignored. For a few moments they matched each other stride for stride, then he moved slightly ahead of her, and she was forced to look at him.

'It's me again,' Paul said lightly, one hand raised in greeting.

She slowed down, but didn't stop. She was surprised by the elegance of his appearance. He wore a tailored navy blazer, complemented by a peppermint striped shirt, and a wide silk tie. He was even dapper, and his gait reflected his confidence. She no longer trusted him.

'It's over,' she said.

'It's over,' he agreed, shrugging his shoulders, and skipping to keep up with her. 'Then it begins again.'

'What begins again?' She looked at him, and thought, he

seemed more open, and consequently vulnerable. It was as if away from that apartment he had shed some protective armour, like a moulting animal emerging from its lair. Jeanne, however, felt reserved in the open. The apartment had been its own defence and heis, but in the harsh light of the world she wanted to keep her own secrets.

'I don't understand anything any more,' she said, walking faster.

He took her arm, and guided her towards the steps to the Metro platform. She held her body rigid, unused to his insistent pursuit—that was certainly something new, she thought. Paul paused in the shadow of the doorway, and touched her cheek, and Jeanne relaxed. She knew it was hopeless, but she couldn't just leave him.

'Well, there's nothing to understand,' Paul said, and before she could answer, he kissed her softly on the lips. He felt her warmth and the reality of her flesh—she was a woman to him now, and an attractive one. For her, it was the first tender embrace of his she could remember.

They walked along the Metro platform, arm in arm, resembling a moody young niece and a kindly uncle exchanging confidences.

'We left the apartment,' Paul explained, 'and now we meet again, with love and all the rest of it.'

He smiled at her, but Jeanne shook her head.

'The rest?' she asked.

Before he could answer, the Metro pulled in, and they boarded it on impulse. Paul pulling her along and guiding her to an empty seat. They sat close together now, like lovers.

'Listen,' he said, happy to be able to talk about himself, and free of his grief. 'I'm forty-five. I'm a widower. I've got a little hotel that's kind of a dump, but it's not completely a flophouse. And I used to live on my luck, but then I got married. My wife killed herself.'

The train screeched to a halt. A crowd moved towards the doors, slamming them open. Paul and Jeanne looked at each

other, and suddenly got off again. She realized that she didn't want to hear about his life, which seemed sad and slightly sordid. In silence they climbed the concrete steps into the orderly, expansive neighbourhood of the Etoile, bathed in sunlight.

'What do we do now?' Jeanne asked.

'You told me you were in love with a man, and that you wanted to live with him. I'm the one you love. So we live together. We'll be happy, we'll even get married, if you want.'

'No,' she said, tired of their rambling. 'What do we do now?'

'Now we're going to have a little drink. We're going to celebrate, be gay.'

Paul believed what he was saying, but felt uncertain as to how to entertain a young woman in the afternoon. Not that it mattered. If she loved him, they would be content wherever they stopped. The idea of formally courting her appealed to him. He needed to have fun, and to convince her that he was capable of it.

'What the hell,' he said, 'I'm no prize. I picked up a nail when I was in Cuba in 1948, and now I've got a prostate like an Idaho potato. But I'm still a good stick man, even if I can't have any children.'

Jeanne felt confused, she was still attracted to him by the memory of the affair, but put off by a vague and rising distaste. She felt exposed in the bright winter sun.

'Let's see,' Paul said, searching for something else to tell her. 'I don't have any stamping grounds, I don't have any friends. I suppose if I hadn't met you, I'd probably settle for a hard chair and a haemorrhoid.'

She wondered why his allusions were always so anal. He held on to the cuff of her coat as he stopped on the pavement, and reared back to look into the Salle Wagram, a dance hall sometimes used for minor boxing matches. The sound of orchestra music reached them, but from the street the hall looked empty.

'And to make a long, dull story even duller,' Paul continued,

leading her towards the Salle, 'I come from a time when a guy like me would drop into a joint like this, to pick up a young chick like you. In those days we'd call her a Bimbo.'

They entered arm in arm. The hall resounded with music projected not from an actual dance band, but from a phonograph set on a table amidst a pile of records with bright covers. The hall was more like a barn, with a vast dome for a ceiling, and garishly lit by dozens of hanging globes. Various tiers of tables overlooked the main floor. There, a dance contest was in progress. Several dozen couples, wearing clothes that had been fashionable fifteen years before, moved in a strange, rhythmic pattern that Jeanne had never seen before. The men had long sideburns, and the women's lacquered hair glistened. They reminded her of vain, colourful birds prancing in a cage, under the eyes of severe middle-aged men and women who sat at a long wooden table on one side of the floor. Before these seated observers were spread paper and pencils. Numbers printed on large squares of cardboard were pinned to the backs of each contestant, and as they twirled, the judges craned their necks. A few waiters stood watching, but most of the hall was empty. White tableclothes had been spread over the tables around the actual dance floor, but the tables on the other tiers supported upturned chairs in their hundreds. A wooden railing separated the dancers from the empty expanses of the ballroom, now a tango palace.

Paul lead Jeanne straight across the floor, and up on to the second tier, where a waiter prepared a table for them with surly efficiency. Paul extravagantly ordered champagne, and took his seat across from Jeanne. He knew she would see the humour of it. The two of them were all that mattered, and the absurdity of their surroundings might provide amusement. But Jeanne could only stare at the contestants. They seemed so grotesque, flitting about in the great, gloomy hall, motivated by the scratchy music and the desire to be chosen by a panel of old men and women.

The waiter brought the champagne, poured their glasses

full, and left them alone Jeanne just rested her head on her elbows

Paul moved next to her

'I'm awfully sorry to intrude,' he said, faking a British accent to amuse her, 'but I was so struck with your beauty that I thought I would offer you a glass of champagne'

She just looked at him blankly

'Is this seat taken?' Paul asked, carrying on with the joke though he knew she didn't care

'What?' she said 'No, it's not taken'

'May I?'

'If you'd like to'

Paul sat with an extravagant flourish, and lifted her champagne glass to her lips Jeanne turned her face away His parody seemed too close to the truth, and they both felt uncomfortable Paul drank deeply, and poured his glass full again Things weren't going quite as he had planned

'You know the tango?' he asked, and Jeanne shook her head 'It's a rite You understand "rite"?' Well, you must watch the legs of the dancers'

He hailed the waiter, and ordered a bottle of scotch and some glasses The waiter looked at him for a moment, then went to get the whisky Paul wanted to enjoy himself, to spend money, to celebrate, and he didn't care what anyone else thought, except Jeanne

'You haven't drunk your champagne,' he said 'Now it's warm I've ordered you a scotch'

The waiter brought the bottle He walked back towards the far end of the hall Their table was isolated Paul poured the drinks with a heavy hand

'You're not drinking your scotch,' he gently reprimanded 'Now come on, just a sip for Daddy'

He held the glass to her lips She looked at him sadly, and Paul felt a growing desperation But then she drank, knowing it would please him, though the whisky seared her throat

'Now, if you love me,' he coaxed, 'you'll drink all of it.'

She drank again 'Okay,' she said, 'I love you' It was just a phrase

'Bravo!' said Paul

'Tell me about your wife'

That was the one thing Paul didn't want to talk about That was past now he was going to enjoy himself, he was going to begin a new life.

'Let's talk about us,' he said

Jeanne just looked around, at the dancers and judges, and the small clutch of waiters in the shadows 'But this place is so pitiful'

'Yes, but I'm here, aren't I?'

Jeanne said sarcastically, 'Monsieur Maître d'Hôtel'

'That's rather nasty'

Paul decided that she was just teasing him After the intensely passionate encounters they had known, it didn't seem possible that she could mock him But for her, the more Paul told her about himself, the less attractive he became

'Anyway, you dummy,' he went on 'I love you, and I want to live with you'

'In your flophouse' It was almost a sneer

'In my flophouse? What the hell does that mean?' Paul was growing angry, and the effect of the whisky seemed to aggravate it Jeanne seemed to be missing the point

'What the hell difference does it make if I have a flophouse or a hotel or a castle?' he shouted 'I love you! What the fuck difference does it make?'

Jeanne moved to the next chair, afraid that he might hit her She picked up her glass, and drank the scotch off neat. The hall, the dancers, Paul and even herself depressed her It was no good going on, but she didn't want to admit it, to Paul or to herself

Placated by her drinking, Paul tipped up his own glass Then he refilled them both The alcohol made him more ardent, and at the same time he felt that quiet desperation mounting Jeanne stared at the dance floor The music and

the couples pinned with large numerals twirled faster and faster as her own mind became clouded. She wished she hadn't drunk so quickly, though now the scotch left her thirsty. She watched the dancers' legs

They pranced and jerked their heads mechanically. Suddenly the music stopped. The dancers turned and swept back to their tables, where they perched on the edges of their chairs with fixed smiles, heads turned towards the judges. A middle-aged woman in a flower-print dress of clashing reds and purple, and wire-rimmed spectacles, stood behind the long table, and announced in a loud, efficient voice, 'The jury has chosen the following best ten couples.'

She adjusted her glasses, and held a paper up before her. A hush fell over the hall as she began to read off the numbers. One by one the chosen ones swept back on to the floor, strutting and twirling to face one another, primed for the music that was about to begin. Gradually the floor filled with poised couples. They held each other with rigid limbs, and stared into each other's eyes blindly. They reminded Jeanne of mannequins.

The woman in the flower-print raised her hands exuberantly, and called out, 'And now, ladies and gentlemen, good luck on the last tango!' Her words reverberated in the cavernous hall. The final judgment was at hand.

The instant music was loud and melodious and infinitely depressing to Jeanne, who could see the daylight slanting through the doorway. To be drunk in the afternoon, and watching automatons made her want to cry. Paul sat opposite her, watching the dancers over his shoulder, morose and unpredictable. Once again Jeanne tried to watch the dancers' legs. They moved in perfect unison as each couple dipped and glided, and then bent backwards in a stylized flourish, their smiles frigid, their eyes and faces blank. She began to wonder if they were really people. It was impossible to imagine them pursuing ordinary human activities.

'Give me some more whisky,' she told Paul.

'Oh, I thought you weren't drinking '

'I'm thirsty now I want some more drink '

Paul stood and walked unsteadily around the table 'All right I think that's a good idea ' He carefully poured more scotch into their glasses Jeanne felt dizzy, and she carefully pulled the glass towards her

'Wait a minute,' Paul said, before she could drink He pronounced his words thickly, preparing to make a toast 'Because because you're really beautiful . '

Jeanne thought that was the toast, and she drank

'Wait a minute!' he shouted, slamming his glass on the table Scotch spilled over his hand, and dripped on to the floor

'Okay '

'I'm sorry, I'm terribly sorry,' he said in his British accent 'I didn't mean to spill my drink '

Jeanne raised her own glass 'Well, let's have a toast,' she said, 'to our life in the hotel!'

'No, fuck all that '

Paul kicked over a chair as he came to sit beside her He leaned against her heavily, and she noticed the lines about his eyes, and his thinning hair Everything she had said about him in the apartment the day before had been true He was an old man, and now he even smelled like one, after he had been at the cooking sherry Jeanne couldn't look at him without thinking of his body She had never before really thought of his girth, and the wrinkles in his skin The secret of his name and existence had falsely preserved him for her

'Come on,' Paul said, 'let's drink a toast to our life in the country '

'You're a nature-lover? You never told me that '

'Oh, for Christ's sake ' Paul knew all they would do in the country was make love Why was she taunting him? He added, going along with her mood, 'Yeah, I'm a nature boy Can't you see me with the cows? With chicken shit all over me?'

'Oh, sure '

'Why not?' he asked, offended

'All right, we'll have a house and cows I will be your cow, too'

'And listen,' he said, laughing raucously 'I get to milk you twice a day How about that?'

'I hate the country,' she admitted, thinking of the villa Everything was becoming obscene, tainted by the alcohol and the sight of those tirelessly twirling bodies drained of life

'What do you mean you hate the country?' he demanded

'I hate it'

Jeanne stood up, and braced herself against the back of her chair She felt she had to get out

'I prefer to go to the hotel,' she said, and the idea didn't sound too ridiculous Maybe there was still a chance, she thought, maybe Paul would look and sound different again, alone with her in a room Maybe she could forget all this, and what he had told her 'Come on, let's go to the hotel'

But Paul took her hand, and led her towards the dance floor They stumbled down from the raised tier, their feet loud on the bare boards, but the music covered them

'Let's dance,' said Paul

Jeanne shook her head, but Paul persisted, pulling her towards the main arena The dancers pretended not to notice them

'Come on,' he cajoled 'Let's dance'

They staggered among the participants Jeanne felt her legs going The music and the stale air of the hall seemed to work with the whisky, then she smelled the reek of a dozen perfumes The spotlights blinded her, and the other couples whipped past them with stylized grace that made Paul's antics outrageous He gripped her in the dance pose, then lifted one leg and curled it around behind him, mocking the others He strutted back and forth, his chin raised theatrically, lifting his knees high and slamming his feet on the floor He attempted to twirl Jeanne beneath one hand, but she slipped and fell heavily, and slid a few feet across the floor

'Don't you want to dance?' Paul asked. He began to dance by himself, twisting and dipping among the couples. They never missed a step. It was absurd, and Paul enjoyed it. He felt good, high on the whisky and the spectacle. His new life was just beginning, and he would live it to the full, the way he wanted. He tried to perform a leap, and fell to his knees.

The woman in the flower-print stood at her place, speechless with indignation. The other judges hovered around her, speaking in harsh whispers, but none of them seemed willing to approach the drunken, irreverent couple.

'The floor is already full!' the woman in the flower-print shouted, waving her hands and advancing towards Paul. 'You're exaggerating.' Like everything else in the event, she took him seriously.

Paul thought that was very funny. He began to laugh, and to dance around her like a matador.

'Get out, sir! What are you doing?'

'*Madame*!' he said, grabbing the woman about the waist and striking the tango pose. Paul began to move her ponderously around the floor, and she struggled to get free. The judges watched in outrage, while the contestants continued to perform.

'This is not possible,' the woman said.

'It's love,' Paul said. 'Always *L'amour toujours*.'

'But it's a contest!' She finally pulled herself away. Her colleagues behind the judges' table came cautiously forward.

'Where's love fit in?' the woman shouted. 'Go to the movies to see love. Now go on, get out of here!'

Jeanne took Paul by the arm, and pulled him towards the exit. But he stopped at the edge of the floor. As the judges all watched him, he pulled down his trousers, bent over, and thrust out his buttocks. The spectators gasped.

He and Jeanne stumbled off the floor. They stopped in a darkened corner, amidst upturned tables and sat heavily against the wall. The music continued unbroken and indifferent.

'Beauty of mine, sit before me,' Paul said, trying to touch Jeanne's cheek, but she turned away. She groaned with real anguish.

'*Garçon*!' Paul snapped his fingers, but no waiter came. They were alone. 'Champagne!' he called, and began to move his hands in time with the music. 'If music be the food of love, play on!'

He turned to Jeanne, and saw that tears were running down her cheeks.

'What's the matter with you?' he asked.

'It's finished.'

'What's the matter with you?' he repeated, refusing to understand what she said.

'It's finished.'

'What's finished?'

'We're never going to see each other again, never.'

'That's ridiculous.' Paul waved his hand, dismissing her words. Then he took her hand and pushed it down inside his trousers. He repeated softly, 'That's ridiculous.'

'It's not a joke.' Jeanne took his penis in her fist, and began to stroke it. She stared straight ahead, the tears still coursing down her cheeks.

Paul leaned back against the wall. 'Oh, you dirty rat,' he sighed.

'It's finished.'

'Look, when something's finished, it begins again. Don't you see?'

'I'm getting married,' Jeanne said mechanically. 'I'm going away. It's finished.' Her hand moved faster.

'Oh, Jesus!'

Paul climaxed, and Jeanne withdrew her hand in disgust. She had milked him, and the last of his strength drained away. She wiped her hand on his handkerchief.

'Look,' he said, trying to joke about her revulsion. 'That's not a subway strap, that was me cock.'

The music died, and the hall filled with the echo of shuffling

feet, and the judge's harsh announcement of the contest winners Jeanne couldn't understand the words, but it didn't matter. She saw the scene—and she and Paul in it. He had become ugly, his life sordid and pointless, his sex useless. She looked at him, and confronted a drunken bum. She loathed him and herself.

'It's finished,' she said, and she got up and walked to the door.

'Wait a minute,' Paul called. 'You dumb Bimbo!'

He struggled to his feet, and fastened his trousers. By the time he reached the door, Jeanne was already walking quickly towards the main boulevard.

'Shit!' Paul said, blinded by the sudden light, and unsteady on his feet. 'Wait a minute, goddamn it!'

He started up the street after her, but Jeanne walked faster. The sound of his feet frightened her.

'Hey, Rube!' he called playfully, but Jeanne didn't turn around. 'Come here!'

She crossed the street at the corner, just as the light changed, and Paul had to wait. His anger and his frustration grew. Suddenly he realized that if she left him now, he would never see her again.

'Come here!' he shouted again, stepping out into the traffic in the blare of horns, and hurrying on. 'I'm going to get you, Bimbo!'

Then they were both running. They moved in and out of the shadow of sycamore trees lining the pavement, and the flashes of sunlight focused on the contradiction: a pretty young woman with her coat open and her hair flying, pursued by a man old enough to be her father, too short of wind and grace for such a contest. They might have been attached by an invisible cord that grew shorter as she slowed her pace, then lengthened again as she moved away from him. But the invisible cord never broke. They remained partners in a curious ritual, isolated from the world through which they dashed.

It was rush hour, and the Champs Élysées was crowded.

Jeanne raced along, dodging in and out of the waves of pedestrians, staying just ahead of Paul. Her fear grew when she realized he was not giving up, and in panic she tried to think of a place she would be safe. She could think only of her mother's apartment, on the Rue Vavin in Montparnasse, and she was certain Paul would not last that long.

He had already fallen behind, and she slowed her pace, watching him over her shoulder. Half a block apart, they passed Grand Palais, splendid in the afternoon sunlight, and the Gare d'Orsay, and crossed the Seine, the sound of their footsteps lost in the growl of competing traffic. Paul stayed with her, though he was gasping for breath, and pains shot through his chest.

At the edge of Montparnasse, Jeanne wheeled on him, and screamed, 'Stop! Stop!'

Then she ran on.

'Hold it!' Paul begged, but it was no use. He lunged forward again.

Jeanne neared her mother's apartment building, and slowed. She didn't want Paul to follow her there, and could think of no alternative. She was aware of his heavy footsteps behind her. Finally he caught up, barely able to breathe, and grabbed her by the arm.

'It's finished!' she said, jerking away. 'That's enough.'

'Hey, cool it.'

Paul leaned against the wall, and tried to reason with her, but she walked around him. 'Stop!' she shouted. 'It's finished. Now go away. Go away!'

Paul loped along behind her, still gasping for breath.

'I can't win,' he said. 'Give me a break.'

He struggled to get ahead of her, and blocked her path. He smiled, desperate to gain control, his hands resting on his hips. He said affectionately, 'Hey, dummy.'

Jeanne spoke rapidly in French, 'This time I'm going to call the police.'

He determined then not to let her go. He would do anythin

to prevent her from getting away from him. She was his last chance for love.

She brushed past him.

'Well, shit, I'm not in your way,' he said bitterly. 'I mean, *après vous, mademoiselle*.'

She paused on the corner, looking across at the doorway of her mother's apartment building. She was trembling, and trying to control the panic that threatened to drive her straight through the door. Paul saw that she was truly afraid. He could reassure her later, he thought, after he discovered where she lived.

'So long, sister,' he said, passing her and stepping into the street. 'Besides, you're a crummy-looking broad. I don't care if I never see you again.'

He walked on, pretending to have lost interest. Jeanne watched him, and then turned and dashed across the street. She slipped through the door of the apartment house, but as she was shutting it, Paul bolted across the street and up the steps, and stepped into the foyer just as Jeanne shut the door of the elevator cage. She looked at him in terror as he grasped the frail iron handle and tried to jerk it open.

The elevator moved slowly upward.

'Shit!' Paul said, and leapt up the stairs, trying to keep abreast of the machine.

'You're finished!' Jeanne cried out in French. '*Tu es fini*!'

He reached the second landing, and grabbed the elevator handle, but he was too late. The cage continued to mount, with Jeanne pressed in the back corner.

'*Les flics*...' she stammered.

'Oh, fuck the police.'

The elevator passed the third landing before Paul could reach the door. He continued to climb.

'*Tu es fini*!' she shouted down at him.

The cage lunged to a halt on the fourth floor, and Jeanne leapt out on to the landing, began pounding on the door of her mother's apartment. Paul came up behind her.

'Listen,' he said, panting, 'I want to talk to you'

Jeanne ran past him, and began to pound on the other apartment door, but there was no response Paul followed her, and when he touched her arm, she began to scream

'Now this is getting ridiculous,' he said

'Help!' she screamed, searching through her purse for her key. 'Help me!'

No one came She scrabbled at the lock of her mother's door, and when it opened, almost fell inside Paul was right behind her, blocking the door with his shoulder She rushed ahead of him through the apartment, seeing nothing, driven by a panic that focused on a single object lying in the bureau drawer There was no stopping him She had always known she couldn't hide from him Still, she was not prepared for his ruthlessness

'This is the title shot,' Paul said, pausing to gaze around at the prints and primitive weapons 'We're going all the way'

Jeanne pulled open the drawer and took out her father's service pistol It felt heavy, cold and capable, and she hid it inside her coat before turning to face him

'I'm a little old,' Paul said, smiling sadly 'I'm full of memories now'

Jeanne watched him with horrible fascination as he picked up one of her father's army caps, and placed it at an angle on his head He moved towards her

'How do you like your hero?' he asked 'Over easy or sunny side up?' He was still charming

He discarded the cap with a flourish She was there now, she was his now, and he couldn't let her go The idea that he had at last found someone to love seemed beautiful

'You ran through Africa and Asia and Indonesia, and now I've found you' Paul meant it 'And I love you,' he added

He stepped close to her, and didn't notice that her coat fell open The gun barrel turned towards him He raised his hand to touch her cheek, and whispered, 'I want to know your name'

'Jeanne,' she said, and pulled the trigger

The explosion carried him back a few paces, but he didn't go down. The reek of burnt cordite filled the air, and the gun in Jeanne's hand trembled. Paul bent slightly forward, clutching his stomach with one hand, the other still raised. His expression had not changed.

'Our children,' he began. 'Our children.'

He turned and staggered to the glass door leading out on to the terrace. As it swung open, the fresh wind caught his hair, and for an instant he seemed almost young. He stepped out on to the tiles, steadied himself against the railing and turned his face towards the bright blue sky. Paris sprawled before him.

With unhurried grace, he removed the chewing gum from his mouth and delicately pressed it against the underside of the balcony railing.

'Our children,' he said, 'will remember.'

That was the last thing he knew he said. But his final word on earth was murmured in a Tahitian dialect. He collapsed heavily against the base of a potted pine, curled like a child in sleep, and died smiling.

'I don't know who he was,' Jeanne murmured to herself, the gun still in her hand, her eyes wide and unseeing. 'He followed me, he tried to rape me. He was crazy. I don't know his name, I don't know him, I don't know. He tried to rape me, he was crazy. I don't even know his name.'

That part, at least, was true.

THE JUDAS SHEEP

Jan Roberts



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Prologue

GREECE—AUGUST 1971

IF A CEMETERY can be considered a strange place for a funeral, it was because this was a strange funeral. The cemetery was an ancient one tucked away in the bright sunlit cliffs that guard the approach to Delphi, half hidden from the village of Ite that lay below. Two women stood alone beneath the scorching August sun listening to the barely audible murmuring of the old priest. The weed-choked graveyard blazed whitely in sharp contrast to the crouching shadows beneath the gnarled old trees. Not a hint of wind relieved the oppressiveness.

In a land where there was never a shortage of mourners to follow a coffin to its last resting place, here were only these two women, tearless dark eyes hidden behind black veils and standing erect as they watched the simple wooden coffin being lowered into the pit that waited impatiently to receive it. They did not touch each other, these two women, there being no mutual need for contact or clinging reassurance. Were there any onlookers, they couldn't help but notice how singularly unmoved these two mourners seemed. But there weren't any onlookers. Strange indeed for a Greek funeral. And stranger still since the man being laid to rest was beloved of his fellow man and one of his country's most renowned painters.

The priest's mumbling mingled harmoniously with the un-mindful buzzing of the bees. And then it was over. The wooden box was lowered into the earth, while below in the town square men sat under the shade of the pepper trees wondering why they had been barred from the services of their friend. There were many speculations as to the reason.

The two gravediggers and the priest hurried away, anxious to put distance between themselves and these unnatural

women who did not cry, the blazing sun and the thoughts that even here were not safe to voice aloud The older woman stared at her daughter-in-law through the black curtain of her veil The expression mirrored in her dark eyes was as strange as everything else about this hot, Greek morning Then she spoke

'This then is his end,' she said between tight lips 'The end to his passions, his struggles his sacrifices The end'

'Or the beginning It depends on how you look at it' The young widow linked her arm through that of the older woman, her fingers grasping the wrinkled hand 'The struggle and passions continue But in a new form'

'You sound just like him'

The widow smiled to herself as she led the mother away from the fresh mound of dark earth It was almost a happy smile 'Remember,' she cautioned the older woman, 'no tears When we pass through the square, they must not see tears'

Part One

'O what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive!'

SIR WALTER SCOTT

1 NEW YORK—SEPTEMBER 1973

RICHARD BURNS glanced down at the thin expensive watch on his wrist, frowned impatiently and strode out of his hotel room. He had twenty minutes in which to make his appointment, and he wanted to get there before his visitor. This was decidedly no way to spend his first evening in New York, he thought as he went down in the elevator, but he had no choice. The summons, for it was practically that, sounded urgent. And after all MacDonald was an old friend. He checked at the desk for mail. There was none. And no phone calls either. He left word that should any calls come he could be found at his gallery for the next couple of hours. He pushed his way through the revolving doors and out into the bustling sidewalk. Deciding against a taxi, he began walking the nine blocks to 57th Street. The air was brisk and invigorating, he needed the time to think, as well as enjoy his first trip to New York in more than a year. It was one of the things he liked best about this city, to stroll its streets at twilight as the lights appeared magically, to be a part of the crowd hurrying in all directions in a seemingly mindless ballet. Automatically, his pace quickened to the city's own pulse beat as he started to cross Madison Avenue against the light. Looking right instead of left, he was almost knocked down by a taxi driven by an obviously homicidal maniac. He dodged the other members of this conspiracy to get him, reached the safety of the other side of the street, and chided himself for forgetting to adjust to this

mad city where everyone drove on the right instead of on the left as one does in civilized places. This was a sore point with him every time he left London.

Momentarily his thoughts were taken off his appointment, but as he turned down the side street that led to the New York branch of his London art gallery, his mind returned to it. He hoped it wouldn't be a prolonged meeting and make him late for his dinner engagement with that lovely young painter who wanted to discuss a possible exhibit. Why the hell didn't he tell MacDonald he was busy, and make the appointment for tomorrow? It always threw him off balance whenever people from the past popped up determined to thrust him back into it. Especially from the part of his life he preferred to forget. Enough that the past had helped shape him so definitely. That he acknowledged. But now that he'd been so successful in pushing it back into the shadows where it belonged, he resented these periodic excursions forced upon him by others. MacDonald was one whose mere presence could conjure up all the unwanted memories, and despite their friendship of more than twenty years, Burns felt the imminent meeting press heavily upon him. Like being pushed into a corner.

The green and white striped awning of the gallery was in sight, and his steps slowed. MacDonald was going to ask one of his favours. Burns was certain of that. And while he liked MacDonald, he didn't like the favours he asked. They usually carried with them an element of personal danger, and sometimes even the possibility of sudden death. He stopped short about a hundred yards from the gallery, no longer in a hurry. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, collecting his wildly wandering thoughts. Why, he asked himself, was he so sure MacDonald was going to dump one of his official problems in his lap? It could be that he wanted to buy a painting. He'd been doing that quite a bit lately, and this visit could very well be as innocent as that. But a teasing intuition told him it wasn't. He tossed the cigarette away, and walked the remaining distance to find out.

Inside the quiet interior, he slipped through the small knots of viewers shifting listlessly from one painting to another, and headed for his office in the rear. His secretary had left for the day, and his desk was neatly stacked with letters, invitations and art magazines. Burns sat behind the desk and immediately felt the steadying influence it and the subdued surroundings afforded him. He picked up the inter-office telephone and alerted the receptionist to his appointment. The mere mention of MacDonald's name brought back the uneasiness. Why should one of the Government's top Intelligence men fly in from Washington just to buy a painting? It disturbed him. And it also disturbed him that his arrival was known to MacDonald, for his message requesting this meeting had been waiting for him at his hotel.

Burns got to his feet, walked swiftly over to the small bar and began mixing a pitcher of martinis. No, he told himself decisively as he sipped his drink, not this time. Over forty is too advanced an age to go on playing at espionage. It might be all right for men like MacDonald who seem to thrive on danger, but his own periodic jousts with New York traffic supplied all the stimulation his adrenal gland needed. Strengthened by his decision, he was almost glad when the buzzer on his desk sounded to announce the arrival of his friend.

Harry MacDonald looked more like a fashionable Wall Street executive than one of the Central Intelligence Agency's more important wheels. He was a big man who wore his expensive clothes well, never permitting his weight to get the better of his height. His hands were soft and well kept, his thick grey hair clipped short, and his melodic voice full of charm and persuasion. In the past quarter century he'd learned well how to cover up his innate talent for ruthlessness.

He entered the office, lay the small flat package which he carried on the table by the doorway, and strode across the room towards Burns with outstretched hands and what was a genuinely happy grin. In the split second it took them to come together, Burns was able to note with concealed amusement

the grey silk shirt with monogram, the grey suit Italian cut and the pearl tie stud. No one who knew this man during the war could ever connect that violent, cursing, dirty fighter with this suave-looking gentleman who was crossing the room so gracefully. As their hands met and clasped warmly, Burns felt, as he always did when they met, a sincere pleasure at seeing his old friend and comrade.

'Hello Mac,' he said, 'congratulations on your promotion.' He was rewarded with a small, almost unnoticeable hesitation that MacDonald immediately covered up.

'How'd you find out about that? It wasn't to be made official for another week or so.'

Burns stretched his pleasure a few more seconds, filling the pause with the pouring of a pair of martinis. 'How'd you find out about my arrival?'

MacDonald grinned. 'It's my business. But yours is to buy and sell paintings. Or do you still like to keep your hand in mine?'

Burns handed him his glass. 'I ran into Len in London just before I left. He filled me in.' He was pleased with his minor victory.

Delicately gripping the glass, MacDonald eased his bulk into a chair and sipped from it thoughtfully. 'Was he sober?' he asked off-handedly.

'Shouldn't he have been?'

MacDonald's grin returned. 'Same old Burnsie, always answering a question with a question. It used to drive me nuts. Or as you English put it, right up the bloody wall.'

'I always found it was a neat way to keep from having to reply to a direct question that might prove embarrassing.'

'Smart. And diplomatic too.'

'Thanks.'

MacDonald removed a flat silver case from the inside pocket of his jacket, took out a long double-filtered cigarette, and after an overlong bit of time tapping it on the case, he lit it.

'You know, Richard, I didn't come all the way up here to discuss Len Hayden and his drinking problem'

I didn't think you did And now that we've settled that point, let's get down to the real reason for this unexpected visit I'm sure it isn't social'

MacDonald laughed heartily 'You really shouldn't have left, Richard You have such an over-supply of suspicion'

'Thanks again'

'And take that look off your face I'm not here to ask you to do a favour for me Like in Berlin'

'I should think you'd know better'

'I do' MacDonald rose from his chair and walked over to the table by the door 'I brought you a present' He unwrapped the parcel and brought the small framed oil painting to the desk, setting it carefully in front of Burns He adjusted the lamp at just the right angle, then stepped back to watch Burns's face

Burns stared at the painting wordlessly It was a portrait of a woman, prominent in the foreground, taking up most of the canvas The background was a rocky, stark countryside, Greek by the look of it The execution of the work was brilliant, its colours alive and sharp, its detail startling

A frown creased itself between Burns's eyebrows, growing deeper as he stared

'It's unmistakably the Greek countryside,' he said 'And that's a Greek face'

MacDonald nodded

'It's a Stavros' Burns's voice was hushed as he said it

'I know'

'But how?'

'It's dated 1965 The signature's missing'

'But there's no doubt it's his His stuff doesn't need a signature' Burns's eyes scanned the painting critically 'She's a nun,' he said slowly 'That black hood is from an order in the Meteora country And the background yes, that confirms it Those rocks soaring upward like knife edges

nothing like them in the world Yes, it's Meteora all right ' He took his eyes from the painting and turned to MacDonald 'But Stavros never worked in that part of the country '

'Not to your knowledge '

'He showed me everything he ever did '

'Perhaps he was working on a new series that got interrupted '

'Perhaps ' Burns turned back to the painting, then walked over to the bar, poured himself another martini and drank it down quicker than one should Here it was again The past Rearing up as sharp and bewildering as the Meteora cliffs Goddamn it, he swore silently, he'd been right MacDonald had brought the past in with him as a butcher brings in the stench of the abattoir

'How long has it been since Stavros died?' McDonald asked, pretending vagueness

'Two years '

'And he left no paintings that you weren't familiar with ' It was not a question

'None In the last year or so before the accident, his output had slowed up He wrote that he was occupied with other things '

'What other things?' The casual quality in MacDonald's tone didn't mask the professional interest that lay behind the words

'He didn't say ' Burns snapped back Here it was out in the open, the reason for the visit 'As his dealer I was interested only in his output '

'But as his friend?'

Burns was silent MacDonald's voice was low and coaxing 'As I recall you owed your life to him way back then You two fought side by side in those days Surely your relationship didn't just deteriorate into that of artist and dealer He must have confided in you '

Burns began to pace restlessly It was now fully in the room with him He could taste it. He felt the chill run through

his body 'That was a lifetime ago, Mac,' he stalled 'A lot can change in a lifetime Where'd you find it?'

'I bought it from an old dowager in Washington A Greek Widow of an American stationed with our embassy in Athens some years ago Her name's Fowler She's got a few others too'

Burns nodded slowly 'I've heard of her She raises money for Greek orphans, doesn't she?'

'That's the one She says she's running short of funds, so she's forced to part with some of her treasures'

'Did she say where she got hold of this? And the others?'

'From Stavros's mother She supposedly found them and sent them to Mrs Fowler who happens to be an old friend of the family'

'Why do you doubt it?'

'Put it down to my policeman's natural intuition'

Once again Burns started his pacing Stavros's work had been bringing in big money for the nine years preceding his death His mother must have known that Why hadn't she sent the paintings to him? They could have gotten a lot on the market Why give them away like that? He sat down opposite MacDonald and voiced these questions aloud

'Or,' MacDonald added softly, 'why didn't he send them to you himself during his lifetime?'

That new question caused the frown on Burns's face to deepen 'I'll tell you why,' MacDonald continued, as he leaned forward 'I had an expert check this out for me' He paused in order to add punch to his following words MacDonald had a sharp sense of the dramatic 'He thinks it was done recently.'

Burns was not prepared for this His head swung up sharply 'How recently?' he asked, his eyes narrowing.

'Well let's say after 1965'

'Are you really saying after 1971?'

'That's right'

'Impossible'

'Why?'

'Because he was killed in August '71'

'And this painting?'

'Your expert could have made a mistake'

MacDonald's tone was patient as he replied 'Richard the expert was Margolis And Margolis doesn't make mistakes'

'There's always a first time'

MacDonald didn't bother to hide his smile as he helped himself to another drink His silence needled Burns, an effect MacDonald expressly desired He kept his eyes on his glass

'Look Mac,' Burns's voice was edgy 'Everyone knows Stavros Alexandratos is dead His wife wrote to me about it, my agent in Athens wrote to me about it, and I read about it in the newspapers Why do you waste your time coming all the way up here to tell me such crap? Don't you have any spies to catch, for Christ's sake?'

'Take it easy, kid,' MacDonald answered easily 'We're not so sure it is crap'

'Oh, "we" is it, now? I see so it is an official visit' Was he wrong, or did he see a sudden flush colour the whiteness of MacDonald's face? He couldn't be certain for it came and went too quickly He chose to believe he'd seen it

'By "we" I meant you and I,' MacDonald replied, looking at him steadily

'Now look here, Mac,' Burns adopted MacDonald's patient tone 'Stavros was making a fortune after a lifetime of struggle He had nine good years of it, then died right after his release from house arrest If he wasn't killed in that car crash, why in hell should he pretend to be dead and end his success?'

'That's just my point, Richard But then of course this painting kind of proves he still is making a fortune, doesn't it? Not that I paid one for it, but the three others are bigger and most likely will get a better price'

'Now I get it,' Burns said 'You think he's pretending to be dead so that his paintings will have more value'

'You know I don't think that at all,' MacDonald shot back at him 'It's the political side of this that interests me'

'Oh, come on now, Mac Stavros stopped that sort of thing

long ago, when they put him under detention. All his energies were used for painting.'

'You don't really believe that, Richard, do you? You knew him too well for that. After all, a year helping him lose his civil war should have been enough time for you to get to know the kind of man he was.'

Burns reflected for a while before replying 'He was different in those days, Mac. He changed when the fighting ended.'

'Bullshit.'

Burns was not offended. 'I knew him as a gentle artist and a tough fighter,' he went on. 'An idealistic revolutionary and a good friend it was fun to be with. He was a soft man who could kill with his bare hands when necessary. It all depended on the circumstances.' The picture of that particular circumstance flashed through his mind. It was his own life that had been at stake, and Stavros had done what was necessary with no hesitation.

'He was a lot of things, no doubt about that,' MacDonald said casually. 'A born leader, wouldn't you say?'

Burns looked at him closely. 'What are you getting at, Mac?'

MacDonald smiled. 'There you go again, Richard. Answering questions with questions.'

'He was a man with many faces. Like all of us.'

'And how many faces do you wear, Richard?'

'Not as many as you do,' Burns snapped back. 'Don't think I'm unaware of the mask beneath the mask you have on.' He got suddenly to his feet. 'Look. You may not believe me, but at this point in my life I'm interested only in Stavros the artist. Everything else happened a thousand years ago. Take your cloak and dagger suspicions somewhere else. You must be running short of the real thing if you can make a case of the fact his mother digs up a few old paintings he forgot to tell me about. And as for sending them to that Mrs Fowler instead of to me, so what? Some people think more of a family friendship than money. You're just not used to it, that's all.'

'It kind of got to you, too, for a minute, didn't it?'

'Only for a minute But it was because your way of looking at things can be contagious Do me a favour for once, Mac, and don't include me in whatever it is you're cooking up I couldn't be less interested'

'What makes you think I'm cooking something? I merely thought that since Margolis felt this was a recent job, you ought to know about it But then as you say, even Margolis can be expected to make his first mistake'

Burns stared at him He knew this man well enough to realize that he shouldn't believe what he was saying, even though it sounded convincing He felt more certain than ever that there was more behind this visit than appeared on the surface He waited

'And to show you my heart's in the right place,' MacDonald said as he got to his feet, 'I'm going to leave the painting with you as a present.'

'That's damned nice of you,' Burns laughed. 'Considering you come up here and dump your little mystery in my lap and then take off'

'I always like to play fair,' MacDonald said as he threw his arm around Burns's shoulder and squeezed affectionately 'But you don't have to keep my little mystery in your lap if you don't want to You can go right on thinking Stavros is dead, and forget everything I've said here, or start being curious about the possibility that Margolis didn't make that first mistake and your friend's alive It's up to you I only thought you should know, that's all'

Burns grinned back into the open, innocent face 'You're a good errand boy, Mac But you protest too much I'll save a lot of time and give you your report now so that you can take it back with you As far as I'm concerned Stavros Alexandratos is dead and has been for two years'

MacDonald knew that his job was over, so he wisely let the matter remain where it was 'Care to have dinner with me?' he asked

Burns shook his head 'No thanks I've had all I can take of

you for one night. No offence, but I have a previous engagement with a lovely blonde without a suspicious mind.'

'The best kind, I always say,' MacDonald grinned slyly.

'So do I.' The two men shook hands at the door. 'I'm leaving for London in a few days,' Burns said. 'Do me a favour, Mac, and don't send me any anxious letters to follow up something for you.'

'You got an unsuspecting blonde there too?'

'No. A redhead.'

A final squeeze on the shoulder, and MacDonald left the office. The grin on Burns's face faded the moment the door shut behind the retreating figure. He walked heavily over to the painting that was propped on his desk, and held it up to the light. He stared at it carefully for a long time, shifting it about to view it from different angles. There was no doubt about it.

'Stavros,' he muttered aloud, 'what the hell are you up to?'

2 WASHINGTON, D C

OUTWARDLY, Maria Fowler was fighting a successful holding action against the encroachment of age, but inwardly she felt the dampness more than she cared to admit. The overheated room was unbearable to the other occupant, but her mind was too preoccupied to complain about it. She was listening to the older woman, but there seemed to be a lack of focus to her look.

'Don't drift away, Eleni,' Mrs Fowler's command was issued in a soft voice to take the sting from it. She held her tall, gaunt body erect, forcing her ever-moving expressive hands to lie at rest in her lap, gnarled slender fingers entwined like the roots of an ancient olive tree. Snapping dark eyes set deep in a pale boney face studied the younger woman opposite her. 'You always seem to be somewhere else, lately.'

Eleni Harper chose not to reply since no direct question had been asked. She merely allowed the focus to come back to her eyes.

'What are you afraid of, my dear?' Mrs Fowler asked.

'What makes you think I'm afraid?'

'I can sense it. It's not our work, is it?'

'Of course not. Maria. I'd be lost if I didn't have that to keep me going.'

'Then what is it?'

What was it? It was difficult to put into words. Eleni felt if she could put it into words it might be easier to bear. She tried to gather her thoughts together. She was a strikingly beautiful woman in her mid-thirties, with a beauty that came from a blending of irregular features that seemed to belong together. The large generous mouth, slightly imperfect nose and dark olive skin added up well. But it was her eyes that were her most startling feature. Large, slanted and wide-set, they blazed with a brilliant blueness against the darkness of skin and hair that framed them. Entering a room with the grace of movement that came natural to her, she could cause all heads to turn without having to do a thing to call attention to herself. Even sitting quietly as she now was doing, her grace and assuredness were obvious.

'Fear,' she said suddenly. 'It's fear I'm afraid of, Maria.'

'You have no reason to be afraid, my dear,' Maria responded. 'We operate under perfect cover. No one imagines we're anything other than what we seem to be.'

It really was hard to put in words after all. How could she explain that the fear which weighed so heavily upon her was the fear that their work would add up to nothing. That Greece was doomed to endless struggle, hunger and frustration. And the fear wasn't only hers, she'd seen it on the faces of the people during the last few years before she'd left that unfortunate country.

She sat quietly, but her shoulders slumped slightly. Maria noticed it.

'I believe I know what's bothering you,' she said. Then after a pause 'How would you like to go back?'

'Back?' Eleni echoed. 'To Greece?'

Maria Fowler nodded her grey head.

Eleni's eyes narrowed as she peered at the other woman. 'On a vacation, or in the line of work?' She smiled at the serious note her choice of words conjured up. But Mrs Fowler didn't smile back at her.

'I have too much need of your abilities to send you off on a vacation at a time like this, my dear.' She reached over to the coffee table near her chair, and picked up a manila folder. She removed a photograph from the folder and held it out. 'Do you know this man?' she demanded.

Eleni studied the enlarged snapshot carefully. She saw a tall well-built man, with light hair that fell wind-tossed about his head. The eyes seemed light as well, and the features were straight and not too identifiable as to nationality. He was a handsome man in an unassuming way, and from the way the photographer had caught him, striding coatless and hatless along a New York street, he possessed a catlike grace in his movements. She guessed his age at somewhere between forty and forty-two. She handed the photograph back to Mrs Fowler.

'I've never seen him before. Who is he?'

'His name's Richard Burns. Does it ring a bell?'

Eleni nodded. 'He was Stavros's dealer, wasn't he?'

'That's right. And he's going to Greece to find out if Stavros is alive.'

Damn, Eleni swore to herself. This could spoil everything. From what she knew of Burns, he was the sort who would stick his nose into all corners to find out what he wanted. 'Why now, after all this time?' she asked.

'I expect his friend MacDonald put a bug in his ear.'

'It's bad, Maria. He could spoil it all.'

'I know. That's why you're going back. Since we can't stop him from going, then he must be kept from looking.'

Eleni was thoughtful. 'Of course,' she murmured.

'And,' Mrs Fowler continued, 'while you're leading him astray you'll also be leading astray the man who will be following him.'

'I'm not sure I understand.'

Maria Fowler's old face beamed with pleasure. This sort of deductive work was added joy to her endeavours. 'When MacDonald bought that painting I hoped he wouldn't notice anything. But I underestimated him. After he visited Margolis I was sure we'd be in for something like this. I don't know for certain just what our Mr Burns thought of the painting, but this morning he cancelled his flight to London and booked one for Athens instead. Now if I'm any judge of how that department operates, they'll have a man on that plane too. What better way to find what they're looking for than to have an unsuspecting Judas sheep lead them to it.'

Eleni lit a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully for a few moments.

'So now everyone is involved,' she said slowly.

'Everyone. And it will be your job to see that not one of them gets too close. Now down to business.' Mrs Fowler placed her finger on the buzzer atop the desk, and almost at once the door opened and a tall, dark-haired woman entered.

'You rang, Mrs Fowler?' the woman asked from the doorway.

'The plane tickets, Stella. And the passport.'

'I put them in the top drawer.'

'Oh. Thank you. I didn't look.' Mrs Fowler removed a long envelope from the desk drawer as the woman left the room as noiselessly as she entered it.

Eleni was handed an airline ticket to Athens, along with her passport and a confirmation of a room in the same hotel as Burns was booked.

'One other thing,' Mrs Fowler added. 'Our friends in Greece have been advised of your arrival, and they've been told not to acknowledge you by your real name. Your passport is made out to Helen Harper, and that's how they'll call you.'

Eleni placed the envelope in her purse and prepared to leave 'I understand I'll keep in touch with you through the usual channels Yassou,' she said with a smile, and walked from the room Mrs Fowler's piercing eyes were pinned on her back as she went

Across town from the old Fowler mansion in a darkly bricked and columned building, down a long corridor in one of the many small offices, two men sat in a high-ceilinged room with the flag and a picture of their chief looking down from the wall George Anderson chewed on his large unlit cigar and nodded his head at Harry MacDonald who sat opposite him He patted the telephone which he'd just slammed down on its cradle 'He's taken the bait,' he grinned 'That was the airport He cancelled his London flight and booked one for Athens'

'What'd I tell you?' MacDonald said 'I know how to handle him Always did'

'You don't think he's on to it?'

'Not him Suspicion, no Curiosity, yes'

'That's the thing that kills cats isn't it?'

'This cat can take care of himself,' MacDonald snapped 'Besides he's a friend of mine so I wouldn't like to see anything happen to him I've told Caldwell to protect him as well as tag him, just in case he's gone rusty'

'Good Now what's new at the Fowler household?'

MacDonald took a small notebook from his pocket and read from it 'Passage was booked from Washington for Helen Harper on flight 201 for Athens Hotel reservations made at the Grande Bretagne for a room on the same floor that Burns most likely will be on Other than that, house quiet, no calls of interest, no mail delivered and no one other than the occupants seen going in or out'

Anderson sighed 'Those ladies sure run a tight ship. I wouldn't mind having that old gal on the payroll'

'I'd choose the young one if I had a chance,' MacDonald grinned Then he got serious 'Her taking off like this proves

my theory that she's been assigned to take Burnsie off the scent '

'I bet she does a good job Lucky guy, your friend Burns '

The two men grinned at each other

3 ATHENS

MANY YEARS had passed since Burns had been in Athens and his heart pounded excitedly at the sight of it glistening in the bright sunlight Over twenty years, he thought A long time to stay away from a place one loved just to avoid coming face to face with the past He'd had many opportunities and logical excuses to have come before, but he'd always let his Greek agent handle that end of the business Since Stavros's death even those excuses had gone Now here he was flying headlong into that past which he tried so hard to avoid all these years He felt like an ex-alcoholic who finds he cannot avoid his friends by refusing to attend cocktail parties Perhaps this snap decision to find Stavros was a good one Throw himself into the past and be done with it Cold turkey The monkey off his back once and for all His spine stiffened automatically as though actually dislodging the simian load He watched as the plane circled the airport

It was almost evening by the time his taxi reached the downtown section of Athens and began threading its way through the rage of traffic The loud hum emanating from the press of shoppers, café sitters, tourists and strollers rose into the rapidly dimming sky like the roar of the sea Burns revelled in it He peered all about him from the windows of his taxi, his eyes drinking it all in It had certainly changed since he'd seen it last And for the better It was more like a city should be Open Not with bullet-shattered walls, hastily built barricades and desperate people huddled in doorways with guns in their hands It'll be tough, he told himself Ghosts like I have are

hard to lay to rest But if it can ever be done, it will have to be done here At the scene He should have come sooner

As he entered the large, cold lobby of the Grande Bretagne he wondered why he had to torture himself in this way, why he hadn't chosen some other hotel Was he purposely exposing himself this way in order to effect some purge? Deliberately booking into the Grande Bretagne, once the scene of so much chaos and despair, to test himself? If so, he mused, it was working He felt depressed

His room was large and spacious, with a balcony that faced out on to Syntagma Square He liked that If the memories got too much for him, he could always step outside and gaze down at the surging mass of life And if that wasn't enough, he could look beyond to the Acropolis He was about to unpack when the phone rang

'Kyrios Burns?' the thickly accented voice inquired

'That's right' Burns wondered who knew he was here He'd advised no one of his arrival Not even his agent

'I am Captain Dimitriou,' the voice introduced itself 'Of the Athens police Would it inconvenience you if I came up to your room for a moment?' The words were spaced carefully as though they had been rehearsed

'What for?' Burns was sharp He didn't like policemen in general, and certainly didn't like them in his hotel room

'I should like to talk with you, if you don't mind'

Burns forced his tone to sound more amused than he felt 'Look, Captain I just got here I haven't had the time to break any of your laws'

The disembodied voice didn't get the joke, and when the halting request was repeated, Burns invited it to come up He was annoyed, but before he could figure out the cause of this visit, the knock on the door announced the visitor As he strode across the room to let him in, he decided not to be co-operative On general principles

Captain Dimitriou was a short man, lean and muscular with a long beaklike nose set crookedly on his pale face There was

an air of careless roughness about him, but he acted polite enough. Almost every sentence he uttered was punctuated with a small hoarse cough that Burns soon found irritating.

'I apologize for intruding upon your privacy, Kyrie Burns.'
Cough

'That's nice. And now that you have, you might tell me why.'

'Orders.' Cough

Burns gritted his teeth. 'Whose?'

'My superiors.' The cough this time had a different note to it, as though its owner were embarrassed. Burns knew that he ought to invite the man to sit down, offer him a drink or something, to show he had nothing to hide. To hell with him, he decided. Let him stand. He watched with amused eyes as the man shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

'It's about Stavros Alexandratos,' Dimitriou finally announced.

'What about him?' Burns wasn't going to make it easy for the man.

'We understand you've come to look into his death.'

Burns's reply overrode the cough. 'You understand wrong,' he said. 'I'm here because I have an interest in a gallery and I make many such trips to search for paintings.'

'And painters?' Dimitriou inquired in a tone he imagined was cagey.

Burns controlled himself. 'Yes, Captain. And painters. But only live ones. If I had any connections with the world beyond the grave and could manage to get paintings from dead artists, I'm afraid I wouldn't settle for anyone less than Rembrandt. No offence of course to your local talent.'

Dimitriou stiffened at these words. He knew he was being made fun of and he didn't like it. His tone and manner changed and he became more authoritative. 'I'll come right to the point, Kyrie Burns,' he said. 'I thought perhaps we could help each other. You see . . . we are of the opinion that Stavros Alexandratos is not dead, and . . . in light of the fact that you

have come here for the first time in so long, we thought you might be of the same opinion '

'That's what you thought'

'Yes' Cough 'And we felt that if you were coming here to search for your old friend, perhaps we could help each other.'

'In what way, Captain?'

'In sharing information '

'What information do you have, Captain?'

Dimitriou was being pushed into a corner and knew it His face tightened He tried to get out of it by changing the direction of the conversation 'Do you know anything about the condition of the body said to be that of Stavros Alexandratos?' he asked

'No I don't ' Burns lit a cigarette and noticed how the other man's eyes shone at the sight of the American brand Screw you, Burns thought as he replaced the pack in his pocket, without offering one to his visitor

Dimitriou continued, his disappointment clearly visible 'The fact is, Kyrie Burns, the body was so badly mutilated that it could not be positively identified as being Stavros Alexandratos '

'And so you doubt that it is, is that it?'

Dimitriou nodded, inhaling gratefully the cloud of smoke that Burns let out Then Burns was struck by a sudden thought

'What do you mean by mutilated? I thought he died in a car crash '

'He did A terrible crash it was Right over a high cliff The car burned and the body burned as well The face was smashed Jaw totally destroyed so that no dental identification could be made The hands were burned so badly that fingerprints couldn't be checked either ' He smiled apologetically 'So you see '

Burns kept his face impassive He was glad he'd seen that painting in New York, otherwise this description of what was supposed to be the vitally alive friend he'd known would have

made him ill. He eyed Dimitriou steadily. 'What about his wife and mother, didn't they identify him?' he asked.

'Of course they did. They said they recognized certain scars and moles that were still visible. But we had no proof that they were telling the truth.'

'Why shouldn't they be?'

Dimitriou shrugged his answer. 'Since then,' he went on, 'his mother died and his widow left the country. And now that the doubts have sprung up, we try all ways to get at the truth. That's why we thought to get in touch with you, Kyrie Burns. To see if you know something that might give us a lead.'

'Sorry to disappoint you.' Burns's eyes were non-committal. 'As far as I'm concerned Stavros is dead.' I'll be damned, he thought to himself, if I'll tell you what I really think. If Stavros wants to play dead, you're the last one in the world he'd want to think otherwise.

Dimitriou sighed heavily. 'It's a pity we cannot be of any help to each other,' he said, his cough returning.

'Yes, isn't it? And now that we've firmly established that fact, would you mind very much if I asked you to leave? I would like to unpack and have a bath before dinner.'

Apologizing profusely, Dimitriou edged towards the door, backing into a table as he did so. Burns suddenly felt sorry for the man. Poor bastard, he thought. He's only doing his job. And not too well at that. Impulsively he withdrew the pack of cigarettes from his pocket and tossed it over to him. Dimitriou caught them, pleased surprise lighting his face.

'Here,' Burns said. 'Try these, they're milder than yours. Might be good for that cough.'

Overdoing his gratefulness, the policeman eased his way out through the door and was gone. Burns stared after him. What the hell was that all about, he wondered. If the authorities were doubtful about Stavros's death, there were other ways they could go about proving or disproving it. The desire he had to get to his friend and warn him that his little gambit wasn't working, grew stronger than it had been after he'd had that

other visit from MacDonald in New York. He decided to plan his next move without delay.

It was while he was all unpacked and preparing to step into the tub that the thought struck him. How did the police know he was in Athens so soon after he'd arrived? He walked across the room and picked up the house phone. 'Put me through to Central Police Headquarters,' he asked the operator. A couple of seconds later his call was answered and a voice announced itself as a Sergeant somebody or other.

'I'd like to speak to Captain Dimitriou,' Burns said into the phone.

'There must be some mistake,' the sergeant informed him. 'No Captain Dimitriou is with the Police Department.'

Burns replaced the receiver gently.

4 THE HOUSE OF SILENT WOMEN

MARIA FOWLER was cold. Even the heat from the roaring fireplace, which along with the heavy velvet drapes made the room unbearable to others, wasn't enough to warm her old bones. She drew the woollen shawl a bit tighter about her shoulders. She had the feeling she'd never again be warm. As warm as she was when she had lived in Greece. She envied Helen. If only she'd been as young she would've taken the assignment herself. To take her mind off thoughts of lost youth, Greece and warmth, she forced her attention back to the manila folders open before her. Antonio Marrucci in Rome was waiting for news, and she had nothing to tell him. There was no way to get the guns through now that the Turk whom they'd always used had died, from what Mrs Fowler hoped were natural causes. The other problem that plagued her was the increasing difficulty she was having in purchasing the arms. Former suppliers were making all sorts of excuses lately. She knew where the pressure was coming from, and she bit her lip.

in frustrated anger Raising the money was no problem Greece had many friends, and opening a new route would soon be possible, but to have their source choked off by outside parties for political expedience was too much to bear She sighed

Across the room at the desk behind a stack of correspondence, her secretary and companion stopped her typing and looked up

'It's nothing, Stella,' Mrs Fowler retorted to the unasked question Why burden that poor woman with her own problems How could she put into words the fact that she found them harder and harder to cope with But they had to be coped with, and as in the past she'd do it alone Regardless of the cold and the memories that seemed to crowd in on her so much of late This work was all she had, it was hers and she'd go on with it as long as her tired heart would allow The sharp ringing of the doorbell snapped her out of her reverie

'Are we expecting anyone?' she asked

'Not to my knowledge,' Stella answered

'Well then, if it isn't important, send them away'

Stella left the room Mrs Fowler stared unseeing into the fire Here it was only September and she was cold It would never leave her, this inner chill, never It had begun when her husband had died and she'd left her homeland Even her work wasn't enough to dispel it She'd have to force herself to stop thinking so much about it

Stella came back, her face pale 'It's a Mr Kostandis He insists on seeing you Says it's important'

'Kostandis Never heard of him Oh well, send him in He must be Greek, and besides I'm bored with all this paper work today.' She cleared off her desk, locked the papers away, and sat back to await her visitor

The man who was shown in was a monstrosity Mrs Fowler stared at him in disbelief, shocked that a person could let himself go in this manner He was a mountain of a man over six feet tall and weighing well over three hundred pounds His

round pig-like eyes darted about from their surrounding pouches of fat, and his small turned up nose perched incongruously above pouting petulant lips. His body was like that of a ripe melon about to burst. Mrs Fowler watched him cross the room towards her, amazed at the grace with which he walked. A pudgy hand with jewel-encrusted rings on three of its fingers was held out to her in greeting. Not being able to bring herself to touch it, she pretended not to notice it. Mr Kostandis withdrew his outstretched hand, and smiled instead.

'What can I do for you?' Mrs Fowler asked, friendly enough. Gleaming white teeth, obviously false, beamed at her. 'Dear Mrs Fowler.' The voice was deep and surprisingly pleasing. 'What an honour indeed to meet such a noble woman as you. And member of a great and renowned Greek family. A distinct pleasure, Madame, a distinct pleasure indeed.' He bowed in lieu of holding out his hand again.

Her instinct told her to distrust this man, and Mrs Fowler always followed the dictates of her instinct. 'You are Greek, Mr Kostandis?' she asked.

'My dear lady, with a name like Kostandis?' Of course I am Greek.'

'You don't look it,' was her sharp response.

'Ah, dear lady, poor Kostis is also a bit of Turk with a dash of Bulgarian thrown in. There is such a mixture in poor Kostis who would like nothing better than to be all Greek. But after all...' one pig-eye winked and the full lips twisted into a leer, 'I had nothing to do with what went on before.'

Mrs Fowler's dislike for the man grew. She detested people who referred to themselves in the third person. Her manner hardened. 'I don't imagine you did, Mr Kostandis,' she said. 'And I also don't imagine you've come here to discuss your mongrel background with me.'

The series of chins bounced with the delight of his laughter. 'Mongrel background. Very good, dear lady, very good indeed. I must remember that.' His outburst covered the inner rage he felt. To calm it, he removed a string of amber beads from his

pocket and caressed their smoothness nervously 'I was warned about you,' he said in a teasing voice 'They told me one must not waste time with you That you are a business woman and should be treated as such '

'Whoever "they" are, they told you the truth '

'It is truly remarkable and reassuring to see such qualities in one of such an advanced age And if you are to be so fortunate as to continue living to an even riper one, let us hope your brain cells do not deteriorate '

Mrs Fowler stiffened in her chair She couldn't be certain, but although the smile didn't in the least diminish on his round face, there was something about his tone that sent a chill of warning through her 'I have every intention of living to a ripe old age, Mr Kostandis And as for my brain cells, since they are in constant and full use, I doubt very much if they'll deteriorate '

As she spoke, she unobtrusively ran her hand along the inner side of the desk, pushed the hidden button and felt the drawer beneath it slide noiselessly open Without giving away the movement with the upper portion of her body, she removed the small pistol and placed it on her lap Her right hand rested tensely upon it

'And now Mr Kostandis, just why have you come here, other than to show such solicitude for my age and brain cells?'

Kostandis replaced the beads, wiped his hands on a large handkerchief, and tried to settle himself as comfortably as he could in a chair too narrow to accommodate his huge bulk 'What they call in this country "getting down to brass tacks" An expression which I must confess puzzles me No preliminaries, no wasting of time with formalities as they do where we come from, eh? What a pity To the point always It takes a lot of joy out of my business '

'And what exactly is your business?'

Kostandis inched himself to the edge of the chair to relieve the pressure on his thighs This would be a lot easier, he told himself, if she weren't such a stiff-necked old prune and the

room a little less like a sauna bath. Beads of sweat were beginning to form on his forehead, and he wiped them away in annoyance. His left hand stole into his pocket and he caressed his beads reassuringly.

Mrs Fowler noticed the furtive movement and realized with pleasure what the warmth of her room was doing to the man. The tiny involuntary smile that played about her lips didn't go unnoticed by the uncomfortable Kostandis, but he continued to play the rôle he'd adopted for the occasion.

'I, dear lady, am in the investment business.'

'Then you may leave. I have no money to invest.'

He shook his head twice, then stopped as though the effort of moving such a ponderous object was too much to do more than twice.

'You misunderstand me, dear lady. Poor Kostis doesn't take money from people, he gives it. Surely I haven't given the impression of being a mere salesman. I do the investing, not you.'

'How interesting.' Mrs Fowler's tone was cool. 'And what do you invest in, if I may ask?' Her fingers tightened on the pistol.

'All sorts of things. Revolutions, guns, people . . .' He waved his pudgy hand airily.

Mrs Fowler hoped she'd be able to handle this unsavoury specimen before her. 'I'm not sure I completely understand why you've come to see me,' she stalled.

'Then I'll attempt to make myself more clear.' His eyes narrowed almost to the point of disappearing in the folds of flesh that encased them. 'I represent an organization that has so much money that it can well afford to finance worthy causes. And since you are involved in a cause that is more than just worthy to us Greeks, I've come to you to offer our assistance.'

Mrs Fowler was thrown off balance by his words. Had she misunderstood the man? Did she allow his appearance to prejudice her judgement? Had she imagined the threats? If so, she would have to get a grip on herself and behave more like a

sweet old lady collecting money for orphans A smile softened her features

'Forgive me,' she said 'You've come to offer money for my Greek orphan children'

His burst of laughter exploded about her ears 'Oh, my dear lady,' he gasped 'How you joke with poor Kostı No, no I have no interest in your Greek orphans Not in the least I have come to offer money to Stavros'

Mrs Fowler froze Her fingers tightened once more on the revolver in her lap 'Who?' she tried to control the quaver that crept into her voice Damn him, she thought He's caught me unprepared

Kostandis shook his head disapprovingly as he clicked his tongue against his teeth 'Come now, Mrs Fowler, don't play games with poor Kostı Don't pretend you don't understand Would I be here if I didn't know in advance that you would?' He pointed a fat bejewelled finger at her 'And just the way in which you said "who" proved you do And it proved as well that Stavros is alive As I always knew he was So now it is up to you to stop wasting time' His tone became businesslike 'I am prepared to offer him a good deal of money to help finance his cause But first, of course, I must see him face to face My organization isn't as convinced as I am that he still lives And until I can offer them definite proof, they are reluctant to part with their money I'm sure you understand their position'

Mrs Fowler remained silent, trying to gather her thoughts together She wished desperately that Elenı were here with her Kostandis continued as though complete accord already existed between them 'So all you have to do is tell me where I can meet with him, and the money will be forthcoming'

Mrs Fowler made her decision 'Get out,' she said

Real surprise stood out in the pig eyes 'I beg your pardon,' he said, almost falling off the edge of the chair

'I said get out, Mr Kostandis Please don't make me say it again You have obviously come to the wrong house'

His breath was sucked in sharply 'My dear lady, I did not

think you would be this difficult You make it all the harder now for poor Kostı ' The threat was more obvious now

Mrs Fowler rose from behind her desk, the cocked revolver pointing directly at the centre of the enormous stomach less than three feet away 'I believe this will make it even harder than you think ' Her tone was flat and successfully masked the thumping of her heart against her rib-cage 'I don't like you, Mr whatever-you-call-yourself, and that should be sufficient reason for your leaving here at once If you need more, consider this revolver which I'm aiming at your obese belly I know how to use it, and have no compunction in doing so '

The fat face blanched and the thick lips trembled in heightened petulance 'Well, dear lady, since you feel so strongly about it, I shall most certainly leave It has never been said that poor Kostı overstays his welcome ' He walked back towards the door, then turned 'Perhaps I might contact his widow in Athens She could very well feel differently ' He smiled broadly and was gone

Mrs Fowler sank back into her chair, and removed two tablets from a small box allowing them to dissolve on her tongue Slowly her breathing became steadier

In the outer hall, white-faced and tense, Stella escorted Kostandis to the front door As she stepped outside, she leaned towards him 'You're a fool,' she said in a low whisper 'Didn't I tell you not to come here? Now you've made yourself known to her and raised her suspicions I told you to let me do it my way '

It's too slow Your way will take for ever '

'Then it'll take for ever '

'I can't wait If I don't deliver him someone else might And I need the money I need it now '

'A little longer and I'm sure I'll have something '

'We'll see We'll see whose methods are better '

The buzzer sounded from inside Stella started to shut the door as Kostandis remained on the top step rearranging his crumpled clothing What a shame, he thought when he was

alone It could have been so simple Now he would have to pack again just when he'd unpacked He disliked travelling Carting his big body about from place to place was becoming an ever-increasing chore Aeroplane seats were so narrow What he dreamed of was to make this one last killing and buy a small villa with the money On some island like Ischia or Corfu A place of his own with servants and Youssef for amusement He smiled That dear sweet boy was waiting for him in Athens It made the trip a little easier to bear He started to walk down the stone steps to the sidewalk

Across the street, a man lingered to light a cigarette Kostandis was too absorbed in his thoughts to notice him The small square cigarette lighter took half a dozen quick photographs before he set foot on the pavement

5 THE MAN OF MANY FACES

MACDONALD AND ANDERSON gazed with interest at the six blown-up pictures tacked on a board 'Kostandis,' MacDonald said 'He used to be known by a lot of other names in his time ' He referred to a slip of paper he held in his hand 'Tarac, Ivanov, Marculescu are a few of them In Vienna he was involved with a right-wing group in an assassination attempt on some Hungarian official It didn't come off And when the group was picked up, Fatso had disappeared Some think he was the one that blew the whistle on his pals In Tangier and Istanbul he was one of the organizers of a smuggling ring from drugs to cigarettes Again he wasn't around when the police closed in In Roumania he was connected with the Iron Guard and was on the welcoming committee when the Nazis came in It was after that lovely beginning that he took up his other pursuits The latest on him is that he's on the edge of some gun-running outfit that keeps him hopping from country to country His home base however seems to be Athens '

Anderson let go with a low whistle 'Cute kid '

'There's a little more He helped run a so-called health clinic in Switzerland with a German doctor who got his training in Auschwitz '

'Nice And now he's on his way to Athens '

'Yeah You thinking what I'm thinking?'

Anderson nodded 'His visit to Mrs Fowler sort of ties him in with things ' He puffed thoughtfully on his long cigar 'Everyone seems to be going to Athens lately We'd better let Caldwell know about him '

'And Burns?' MacDonald asked

'No From what you've told me about him, the moment he suspects that we know about his little mission, he'll back off I'm sorry, Mac, but if he's going to lead us to our man he'll have to do it unwittingly Caldwell will look after him '

MacDonald didn't answer He walked to the window and looked out at the grey, cloud-filled sky What was he letting his friend in for, he wondered He was worried

6 REFLECTIONS IN THE MIRROR

THE BAR at the Grand Bretagne was crowded People of various nationalities and dress were gathered together for the cocktail hour to indulge in whichever pastime most appealed to them Drinking, conversation, seduction or intrigue The mixture of languages used for these activities hummed unintelligibly about Burns's ears as he sat at the long wooden bar gazing reflectively into the mirrored wall before him His eyes fell on the plump, pink-faced man whom he'd seen on the plane coming over The typical tourist, Burns mused, exchanging his boring experiences with a captive audience consisting of another typical tourist He shouldn't wear that pink tie Burns thought with amusement, it clashes with his complexion He let his eyes wander to the other side of the room

where they came to rest on a corner table at which an attractive young lady was sitting alone. Even from that distance Burns could tell that she was tense and uncomfortable. She was obviously waiting for someone, and was trying hard not to give the impression that she was alone and waiting to be picked up. But the slow parade of men on the promenade who ostentatiously passed her table didn't seem to be getting the message. Burns watched with amusement. He knew their type well. Journalists who like to call themselves by the romantic name of foreign correspondent, young embassy workers, unattached tourists and the usual expatriate. But the girl wasn't having any. Her eyes were fixed unwaveringly at the entrance, looking through the men periodically blocking her view.

Obviously American, Burns thought. And obviously rich from her manner. His thoughts strayed. While his gaze was still on the reflections in the mirror, the figures blurred as his mind focused on his own immediate problems. Stavros's painting, the policeman who wasn't a policeman, where MacDonald fitted into all of this, and what direction to follow in order to find Stavros. Much as he tried to keep it from coming to the forefront of his mind, the thought that he'd impulsively begun a wild goose chase came anyway. He ordered another scotch and re-focused his eyes on the figures in the mirror.

His gaze was caught by the entrance of a tall well-built man who stopped in the doorway and looked around. Burns was startled into instant alertness. There was something sharply familiar about the man. He stared hard as the man made his way through the tables. Recognition came with a jolt. It was the jagged scar on his right cheek that did it. Nikos. Who along with Stavros had sheltered him when he was on the run. Nikos who had fought alongside them in the Civil War. Burns glowed. What luck, he thought. Just the man to lead him to Stavros. He watched the reflection come closer. Look this way, he told the reflection silently. Look this way. Then their eyes met in the mirror. Burns's heart pounded for the split second of contact that ensued, then sank as the black eyes of Nikos

turned away. Not a flicker of recognition had passed through them. The swarthy face hadn't changed expression. Burns watched as his old friend located the person for whom he was searching and made his way in that direction.

Burns was puzzled. He couldn't have changed that much since 1950 so as to make himself unrecognizable to a man he'd been in close contact with for so long. What was it? What game was being played? He swung around in time to see Nikos sit down at the corner table occupied by the young American girl. He finished his drink, paid his check and started for the door. He deliberately slowed his steps as he passed their table. Nikos didn't look up.

At the desk Burns felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. He whirled around and stared into the blank-eyed gaze of Nikos. 'I beg your pardon, sir,' Nikos said in Greek. 'You dropped this as you passed my table.'

Burns looked down and saw a slim silver cigarette case in Nikos's outstretched hand. He took it and put it into his pocket. 'Thank you,' he replied, also in Greek. Nikos turned on his heel and walked back into the bar. Burns returned his key and walked to the far side of the lobby where he sat down. He took the case from his pocket and snapped it open. The note was under the metal clip. He slipped it out. It was in Greek.

'The old place. Tonight at ten.'

Burns grinned. Like old times, he thought. Was the situation the same, or was Nikos just playing the game? He carefully tore the slip of paper into bits and burned them in the ashtray, then he walked out of the hotel into the milling crowd of Syntagma Square.

Sipping his *ouzo* and water, Burns pondered the message and the memories it dredged up. He was being forced to face the ghosts now. Maybe it was for the best. Maybe this was the reason he'd dashed off as he did, using the painting as an excuse. The memories of the past and the emotions they gave birth to flooded over him as he sat at the small table, a lonely

island in the midst of the bustling humanity of an autumn evening in Athens

The old place The taverna where the resistance fighters used to meet in secret and discuss plans that were destined to come to such tragic conclusions The place where Stavros had introduced him to Kita Kita young and vibrant with life

singing in that deep wondrous voice of hers It was at the taverna that they'd had their wedding supper, and it was the place they'd had their farewell meal before he'd sent her off to a convent to have their child in safety And it was to the same taverna that she'd returned still pregnant, to join them when the fighting was in Athens And it wasn't far from the place that she was killed less than a week later The time for burying the ghosts was at hand, and thinking about her was making it easier to do It was wrong continually to breathe life into the past Wrong to keep living it as though it were alive Kita was dead, and must stay dead And Stavros? Perhaps he too was dead And all this running about to prove him otherwise was just the old habit of denying the facts Just as with Kita

Burns considered not keeping the appointment with Nikos But he dismissed the thought It was too late The ball was rolling He paid for his drink and decided to go for a walk He had two hours before facing his memories

'Was he who you thought he was?' the girl asked Nikos when he returned to the table

Nikos laughed 'Amazing how alike you Anglo-Saxons look I could have sworn he was the man who'd rented a car from our agency and never brought it back But he wasn't'

The girl pouted 'Do I look like all other Anglo-Saxon girls?' she asked teasingly 'If you met me a year from now wouldn't you know who I was?'

Nikos studied the upturned face Dark eyes twinkling from beneath long blonde bangs She was only twenty-four, a far cry from the little girl who left Greece with her mother in '51 when her father had been killed in the fighting But she looked

older Too much make-up and too much acquired worldliness
A coolness he didn't approve of in one so young He didn't like
the result

'I'd always know who you were,' he said in reply to her
taunting question 'You look just like your mother Except
for the blonde hair'

'I bleach it,' she grinned

'And the name? You bleach that too?'

She gulped down the remains of her martini, and lit a
cigarette before answering 'Mother married a man named
Phillips It's a nice American name so I took it'

'And Coco? What sort of name is Coco for a girl?'

'It's a hell of a lot better than Fanni. Imagine what I'd be
going through with a handle like that'

Nikos's puzzlement was sincere 'Why, what's wrong with
Fanni? It's a perfectly good Greek name'

Coco laughed 'In Greece You'd never guess what it means
in the U S' She blew a cloud of smoke directly into his face
'You don't approve of me do you, Mr whatever-your-name
is? God I can't pronounce Greek names You know something,
I don't like your country Never did Maybe it's because it was
always being pounded into me Greece The civil war All that
sort of crap'

'Then why are you here?' Nikos's voice was low

'Good question When Mama died I promised her I'd visit
Papa's grave' Her voice grew mocking 'She wanted me to put
flowers on it Isn't that touching?'

Nikos couldn't understand this girl sitting opposite him
Such hardness Such lack of emotion in the child of his old
friend was incomprehensible to him As though reading his
thoughts, Coco suddenly remembered the question she'd been
wanting to ask him 'Hey, tell me How the hell did you know
I was Spyros Kılalis's daughter and that I was in Athens?'

Despite his experience with tourists he still found it diffi-
cult to get used to the directness of American women Especi-
ally in one so young He chose to skirt the questions by telling

her instead of how he and her father had fought together first against the Germans and later in the civil war. How he was present at the wedding of her parents and at her birth. And how it was he who was supposed to go out with her father the night the gold was buried, but because he came back late from Athens missed the mission. It was on that job her father was almost captured due to an informer, and got that leg wound which caused his limp.

'I always felt that if I had gone along with him, he wouldn't have been wounded,' Nikos explained. 'I blamed myself for his limp.'

'What gold?' Coco's eyes were expressionless.

'The gold the British dropped to us during the German Occupation. Gold as well as arms were dropped to the Andartes. The arms we used, and the gold was buried for future use.'

A long pause followed during which Coco let her eyes roam. Then almost casually she asked, 'Was it ever used?'

'It was not easy to do anything with it while the Germans were here. Some of it was put to use during the civil war.'

'Then there's some left?'

'Yes. After the fighting was over in '51, Stavros decided to keep it hidden for the time it would once again be needed.'

'Where'd they bury it?'

'I don't know,' he replied. 'Only your father and Stavros knew.'

'And now they're both dead.'

Nikos hesitated. 'Yes,' he said.

'How inconvenient. And they never told anyone?'

Nikos looked at her closely. 'Not to my knowledge.' He wiped the gathering perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. 'I should have gone with them on that mission,' he said in a tight voice.

'You said that already.' She smiled as their eyes locked. 'Yes, it is a shame. Then you'd know where the gold is, wouldn't you?'

'That wasn't what I meant The guilt for your father's crippled leg has always weighed heavily upon me Especially since it was due to that leg that he was captured and executed in '51

He wiped his forehead again

Coco crushed out her cigarette 'Well, that's life,' she said

'You're a very hard young lady,' Nikos observed

'Harder than you think' She took her purse and coat, got to her feet and looked down smilingly at the older man 'I'll tell you what Mr uh Nikos If I decide to do any touring around, I'll hire one of your cars Maybe you'll give me a good rate for old times sake Thanks for the drinks'

Nikos watched her as she weaved through the tables towards the door, breasts bouncing under the tight red sweater, and buttocks swaying in deliberate temptation His was not the only pair of eyes that looked after her He tossed down the remainder of his drink Their meeting hadn't gone at all as he'd intended

He swore angrily to himself

7 REUNION

NIKOS FRANGIDAKIS took Burns's outstretched hand in both of his and gripped it warmly 'It's been a long time, Apollo,' he said

Apollo Burns's throat tightened with unexpected emotion Like romantic adolescents they'd chosen the names of the gods for their own *noms de guerre* 'Yes,' he replied as he returned the grip 'It has indeed'

They spoke in English Nikos's greeting in that language indicated he felt it safer since the other patrons were Greek. Aleco's had changed little in the intervening years, Burns thought Tucked away on a twisted narrow street not far from Kolonaki Square, it was as though time had passed it by The

cast-iron tables were covered with what he felt sure were the same checkered table-cloths a bit more faded from countless launderings. The walls were the same pale green with added cracks, and the familiar, tantalizing odour of fish being cooked in oil and herbs filled his nostrils with nostalgia.

As in the past, they automatically sat at a table in the rear of the restaurant close to the back exit. The two men studied one another in silence. Burns was moved more than he'd imagined he'd be. This was one of the men with whom he'd lived for almost a year in the hills of the Epirus range. He was part of the past. Part of Stavros. Part of Kita. He was smiling broadly into Burns's face.

'It's good to see you here, Apollo.'

'And it's good to be here, Nikos,' Burns meant it. The pain was not as bad as he'd thought it would be. They were handed a menu and turned their thoughts to food. They ordered onion soup, crayfish and souvlaka, cheese, halvas and *retzina*. As they waited for the food to be brought, Burns sipped the sharp-tasting wine.

'You've changed, Nikos,' he said.

A lot has happened to change me,' Nikos replied.

An awkward silence hung over them as they ate. Burns's mind swarmed with a mixture of questions and memories. It was difficult to be in the presence of one with whom you'd suffered and struggled without feeling strange. In a situation like this small talk was impossible. Silence was better. It was indeed a long time since that night when the earth trembled as though an enormous fist were shaking it, and the black night was filled with the sound of guns, grenades and screams. He'd only to close his eyes and he could see again the young Nikos, pistol in outstretched hand, mouth a round hole edged with gleaming teeth as his scream mixed with the noises. That youthful fury was no part of the well-dressed middle-aged man before him. He looked at the greying bush of hair once so unruly, now neatly controlled, and the fine lines in the deep olive skin. Nikos was from Crete, a different sort of Greek.

altogether. It was possible that the Nikos he remembered was still hiding beneath this new exterior. If so, that could explain why this meeting was called in so secretive a manner. He wondered about this but waited until they were sipping their after dinner coffee before voicing it.

Nikos shrugged. 'Old habits die hard I guess.'

Burns smiled to himself. They all had it, he thought. That love of mystery and intrigue so dear to the hearts of revolutionaries. Like Stavros who had the patience and lack of scruple to go along with it. Pretending to be dead. Surrounding himself with mystery and doubt. But for what reason?

'I've come to find Stavros,' he said, pitching his voice low since the occasion seemed to call for it. He was surprised to see that Nikos was not.

'I guessed as much.'

'When can you take me to him?'

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'Because I don't know where he is.'

'But you know he's alive,' Burns countered.

Nikos shifted his body closer, leaning on the table. 'Let's put it this way. I think he's alive. There may be some who know for sure, but I'm not one of them.'

The manner in which the words were said shocked Burns. The feeling of shock was replaced with one of sadness. Yet, he reasoned, why should he be surprised at Nikos's retirement from political activity? Hadn't he done the same since those eventful days? His silence was eloquent enough to inform his former comrade of his opinion. Nikos's shoulders went up in a slow shrug accompanied by a grimace, that Mediterranean gesture that conveyed so much.

'I'm not involved any more,' he explained. 'I'm a businessman now. A man who can walk the streets of Athens without looking over my shoulder. And I like it that way.'

Burns's eyes swept over the man opposite him. The air of the businessman, like the well-cut suit he was wearing, sat

unnaturally upon him. He couldn't resist a grin. 'I'm sorry to say your new uniform doesn't suit you as well as your old one did.'

'Neither does yours.'

It struck home. Burns changed the subject abruptly. 'All right,' he said, 'then tell me where I can find someone of the old crowd who can help me.'

'I don't know where they are. Athens isn't safe for them. So if they're here, I wouldn't know about it.'

To Burns's question of why Athens wasn't safe, he explained about the political arrests that had taken place in the past and the recent recurrence of raids on political groups. While at present it wasn't as bad as it had been, there were signs that more suppression was imminent. The word had gone out just before Stavros's death that he was marked for arrest. It was common knowledge at the time that he was the driving force behind a group dedicated to bringing about the return of democratic government to Greece. He was becoming too dangerous to be on the loose. And if what had gone on before with others like him was any indication, he'd be sent off to one of the penal islands for thirty years. This could well have meant the finish of his efforts and the reform movement he led. But before he was picked up he died in that car accident. Nikos cut off his account abruptly with that word 'accident', and the way in which he pronounced it told Burns all he wanted to know.

'And the movement?' he asked.

'There isn't any.' He paused. 'As far as I know.'

Burns nodded silently. More than ever he knew he was right. The accident was a put-up job to take off the heat of the authorities. If he knew his man, Stavros was still in business and believing himself safe. But if MacDonald suspected something, then others might as well. He had to get to Stavros and warn him.

'Why have you returned at this time, Richard?' Nikos was asking him. 'Are you working for somebody?'

Burns flushed. His initial reaction was anger, but he held it

down 'That's not a nice thing to say, Nikos You know me better than that'

Again that shoulder-mouth movement 'Excuse me Like I said, old habits die hard It was just the sudden appearance of people from the past The coincidence made me wonder, that's all'

'What do you mean, people?'

'Oh that girl you saw me with this evening for one'

'What's she got to do with Stavros?'

'Don't you know who she is?' Nikos's eyes gleamed shrewdly 'Somehow I thought you did Coming here from the U S on the same plane It seemed obvious'

Burns said nothing The first thought that struck him was that Nikos knew on which plane he'd arrived Was their meeting at the hotel no accident after all? And what had this girl to do with it? He knew if he waited and kept silent, Nikos would be forced to go further He filled the pause by lighting a cigarette. Nikos tried to outwait him, but in the end gave in first

'She's the daughter of Spyros Kilalis' His reward was the look of surprise that came over Burns's face 'I understand she's come back to Greece to visit his grave' His eyes twinkled 'At least that's what she says'

'Your tone indicates you think otherwise,' Burns replied 'You mean she's looking for Stavros too?'

'Maybe not But there's other things she could be looking for'

Burns tried to read his mind There was something about his furtive, knowing manner he didn't like This time he was forced to break the silence 'What other things?'

Nikos ordered another coffee and waited a few moments to let it cool before taking a sip Then he replied slowly, his eyes averted 'It could be she's here for the gold'

This was surprise number two for Burns and he showed it 'The gold?' he exclaimed Then he remembered 'Oh, you mean Hasn't that been used up yet?'

'No Stavros was waiting for the right moment'

'And you're thinking she might beat him to it, is that it?'

'It's not impossible After all her father was the only one outside of Stavros himself who knew where it was buried'

'I can't see Spyros telling his two-year-old daughter a secret like that before he died'

'But he could've told his wife'

Burns pondered this for a moment 'What's this got to do with you?' he asked 'I thought you were uninvolved'

'I am It's just curiosity The two of you popping up like this, I thought you might be working together'

'You must be out of your mind, Nikos,' Burns snapped 'I came here to look for Stavros and nothing else I couldn't be less interested in that gold And from the look of her, I'd bet that girl feels the same'

Nikos finished off his coffee and wiped his mouth 'You're right, Richard Forgive me I always had a suspicious nature and sometimes it gets the better of me No hard feelings, eh?' He reached across the table to lay an affectionate hand on Burns's shoulder

Burns assured him there were none, and got to his feet He laid some money on the table, said his goodbyes, and walked towards the entrance He was stopped by Nikos's voice He turned Nikos was grinning at him

'Do you mind returning my cigarette case It was a gift'

Burns walked the few steps back, laid the case on the table, and left the restaurant He had the uncomfortable feeling that he had been toyed with

Nikos's eyes narrowed as he watched him leave The feeling he had was that not everything had been said that should have been He ordered another *retzina* and sipped it, deep in thought

8 MEETINGS

FROM HIS TERRACE next morning, Burns looked out at Athens bathed in that unbelievable brilliance that caught and reflected itself blindingly. A good day for a drive out into the countryside, he decided. To gather together his thoughts and to assess the strange things that had occurred since his arrival. The idea had come to him just before falling asleep the night before that he ought to pay a visit to Stavros's grave. Or what was supposed to be his grave. It was on the way to Delphi, so he could at least add a pleasant visit to an unpleasant one.

It was while making arrangements at the desk to hire a car that he caught sight of her. There was something about the cool beauty of the woman that held his attention. Her grace of motion, startling blue eyes contrasting with dark skin and hair, and her well-developed figure would have been enough, but there was something else. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. He watched as she dropped her key on the desk and sauntered out on to the street, putting on a large pair of dark glasses as she did so.

The delivery of the car confirmed for noon, Burns hurried out after her with the vague hope of perhaps finding her sitting alone at some sidewalk café where he could join her with some as yet unformed pretext or other. But the white-clad figure was nowhere in sight. Swallowed up in the crowds on Syntagma Square. In a way he was relieved, since the pretext was still unformed, so he was spared making an adolescent fool of himself. He decided to walk to the Zonar for breakfast.

It had changed since he'd been there last. Newer-looking with its gleaming glass window and striped awning. The tables and chairs that crowded the sidewalk wore a freshness that seemed to deny the arrival of fall. It was unusually crowded for that time of day, and there were no free tables. Despite himself he found that he was hoping to spot the woman in the

white linen suit As he silently berated himself for his foolishness, a loud voice rose demandingly above the hum of the patrons

'Over here,' it called out 'Why not join us?'

Burns quickly identified the voice as it was accompanied by an enthusiastic waving of an arm It was the plump, pink-faced man who'd come in on the plane with him His pink tie of the night before was replaced by a bright yellow sports shirt The change was not for the better, Burns decided as he tried to ignore the invitation

But the man was standing now

'Don't be shy,' he called across the distance that separated them Burns cringed inwardly God preserve me from these jolly tourists who think sharing an aeroplane is a formal introduction. His proper British soul, which he thought he'd buried long ago, was offended To bury it even deeper, he decided to accept the well-meant invitation He smiled as he made his way through the coffee-sippers and brioche-munchers to his host

It wasn't until he was almost at the table that he noticed another occupant there, and when she turned her blonde head in his direction he saw it was the girl whom he'd seen the evening before with Nikos, the daughter of Spyros Kilalis Things are picking up, he thought as he stood alongside his new found friend

'You looked so forlorn,' the man was saying as he draped a friendly arm around Burns 'And we have an empty chair here My name's Charles Caldwell but my friends call me Chuck I came in on the plane with you the other day, remember?' Without waiting to find out if Burns did or not, he plunged on 'We're at the same hotel too Saw you at the bar last night Since fate seems to be throwing us together like this, I thought I'd push it a little and get acquainted' He chuckled as he squeezed Burns's shoulder 'We Americans should stick together in these times, don't you think?'

Burns wriggled free of the embrace 'I'm sorry to disappoint

you, but I'm not American I'm British' He wondered if this would mean the withdrawal of the invitation

The chuckle grew into a full-throated roar of laughter 'Same difference, friend We're practically kissin' cousins Come on and sit down' He gestured towards the girl 'This here's another kissin' cousin Name of Coco Phillips' He turned to Burns 'What'd you say your name was?'

'Burns Richard Burns and my friends do not call me Dick' 'That proves you're not American What'll you have?'

Burns ordered a coffee and a brioche and studied his two table companions The man was a bit too friendly for Burns's innate reticence, but he seemed sincere enough A bit loud in manner and dress, however it went with his stocky physique and cherubic cheeks As he shifted his gaze from his host, he saw that the girl was looking at him A coolly appraising glance, that of a woman obviously on the make It disturbed him, knowing who she was He wondered why she was using another name

'You don't look English,' she said in a husky voice, interrupting Caldwell's flow of one-sided conversation 'I could've sworn you were an American'

'I spend a good deal of time in the States,' Burns explained 'I guess some of it rubbed off'

She placed both elbows on the table and rested her chin in cupped hands, her features half hidden by the mane of long hair 'Where in the States do you spend it?' she asked

'New York mostly'

'And how do you spend it?'

He deliberately ignored the suggestiveness that lay behind the question 'In my art gallery'

'You are an artist?'

'No I represent them'

'Oh' Her voice was flat as she sat back, all interest lost

'An art gallery,' Caldwell jumped into the breach 'Well, what do you know That's one thing I never went in for Buying paintings Stocks and bonds are more my speed Although

I must say a lot of people I know sometimes make as big a killing buying your goods Maybe I ought to look into it' He chuckled as he dipped his brioche into the small cup of dark coffee

'I thought you were something else,' the girl said suddenly
'Like what?' Burns asked

She shrugged 'Oh, I don't know A foreign correspondent Or a secret agent You look like a secret agent'

'You mean what they're supposed to look like, but seldom do outside of the films'

Caldwell laughed 'He's right Any secret agent who looks like a secret agent has got to be a flop'

Coco didn't take well to this bit of friendly chiding A sulky girl, Burns decided The typical spoiled, indulged, bored little rich girl Knowing her parents as he did, he was puzzled as to how she could've turned out this way Or was it a pose? He couldn't be certain Small talk then ensued, the sort of talk tourists use to exchange experiences and cement new-found friendships that last only as long as the tour Coco retreated behind round outsized dark glasses as Caldwell kept the conversation from dying with stories of his adventures in various market place in the Near and Middle East When he started in on all the bargains he expected to find here in Greece, Burns suddenly turned to Coco

'Are you Greek?' he asked

She couldn't have been more startled if he'd jabbed her with a pin 'No, I'm not' Her voice was hard and metallic Recovering her composure, she reverted to the manner of disinterested boredom she'd had before 'What made you ask?'

'I saw something in your eyes before you hid them behind those goggles, that made me think you were of Greek parentage'

'Oh? And what was it you saw there that made you think I was of Greek parentage?' Her tone was mocking now

Burns ignored it 'The dark liquid eyes of a Homer goddess'

She flushed deeply as Caldwell picked up his cue 'Hey,' he guffawed, 'that's not bad Not bad at all for an art dealer I must remember to use that line'

Burns brushed away the over-friendly flies from his cup, finished what remained of his coffee, and pushed back his chair After a brief scuffle with his host over the check, which he lost, he made his apologies for dashing off, promised to have a drink together at the hotel, and left

'Nice chap,' Caldwell said loudly enough to be heard by the retreating Burns 'I like the English They talk so nice' He paid the check, and as they got up to leave Coco took off her glasses to wipe them With exaggerated scrutiny, Caldwell examined her eyes

'You know he's right,' he remarked seriously 'They do look like the eyes of a goddess Homer's or otherwise'

Burns drove leisurely The road was a good one and the day blazingly beautiful Years had gone by since he'd been on this road, yet he seemed to know every inch of it Strange, he mused, how the past can rush up and envelop one, and make it seem like the present He looked forward to another visit to Delphi with impatience, and promised himself only a short stop in Itea He brushed from his mind the ridiculousness of visiting a grave marked as Stavros's when he was so certain that someone other than Stavros lay there Yet a small part of his brain managed to reply with the words 'just in case'

He slowed down to allow his eyes to drink in the sight of the wide Thebes mountains dotted with fields, patches and flocks of sheep Down into the broad valley that lay between Thebes and Lavidia, his thoughts were only on the beauty before him and the pity that so often in the past it had been despoiled by wars

What a tragedy, he thought, that this country which had given to the world the concept of democracy, had to struggle endlessly to have it for itself And if what Nikos had said was true, more struggle was in store Perhaps his coming here at

this particular time was to prove more meaningful than he'd planned it to be

Arachova loomed before him. A mountain village of pink terra-cotta houses perched high over the valley. He realized he'd missed the turn-off to Itea, and as he rounded a bend in the road he hoped he'd find a wide space ahead to turn around. Suddenly, in front of him was an automobile pulled off the road slightly and with its hood up in the air. He had to swerve to avoid piling into it. He came to a halt a few feet past the stalled car, and looked back. He saw the figure of a woman in a white linen suit lift her head from under the hood, and turn to look at him. He caught his breath. It was the woman he'd admired that morning at the Grande Bretagne. He threw the car into reverse and backed up. 'Can I be of any help?' he asked.

'As far as this stubborn thing is concerned, I doubt it. But you can give me a lift.' He was pleasantly startled by her deep melodious voice.

'Perhaps I should have a go at it,' he offered as he got out of his car.

'Don't bother. I wouldn't want you to get yourself all greasy on my account. Let the man who rented it to me come out and fix it.'

He gave her his handkerchief, and as she wiped the spots of grease from her hands and face, he introduced himself.

'I noticed you at the desk this morning,' she told him. 'You were staring at me, Mr Burns.'

'Was I?'

'Indeed you were. And most shamefully.' Her tone was bantering, matching the gleam in her eyes.

'Couldn't help it,' he admitted, 'I'm only human.'

She laughed. 'My name's Helen Harper and I'm very happy to make the acquaintance of a fellow human. Especially on such a lonely road.'

'There was a time when wars were fought in this country for a Helen,' Burns said.

'Wars have been fought here in my time too,' she replied wryly 'But not for me'

For the second time that day he asked the same question 'Are you a Greek Helen?'

She smiled 'A half-Greek Helen'

'Then since we're in the land of that half, may I call you Eleni?'

'That would be nice I prefer it'

'Where were you heading for, Eleni?' Burns asked

'Delphi I had hoped to have a few words with the Oracle, but this ridiculous car had other ideas'

Burns offered to drive her there if she wouldn't mind a short detour to Itea, and when she agreed, they got into his car and headed back in the direction of the turn-off. They talked of the stroke of luck that caused him to miss the road to Itea thereby bringing about their meeting. He confessed that he'd tried to find her that morning, but had failed, and she responded with the assurance that Fate had a better plan for them.

'You believe in Fate?' he asked

'Do you know a Greek who doesn't?' she replied

Burns had to admit he didn't. They remained silent for a while after that, and he was struck by the fact that neither one of them felt the need to keep the conversation going with the usual small talk called for in a situation such as this. It was as though they already knew each other and felt completely at ease to enjoy the beauties of the countryside in shared silence. He liked it. It was a long time since he'd felt like this with another person. Was it possible to fall in love in five minutes? He wondered. Intelligent adults usually leave such romanticism to the young and inexperienced. He'd done it once in the past, but he was young and inexperienced then. And romantic. He weighed the possibility that people didn't change after all, at least internally. Then he reminded himself that whether he changed internally or not, externally he was too old to act like a fool over a beautiful woman.

And yet
'Careful'

Burns literally jumped at the sound of her voice 'What?' he exclaimed

'I said be careful You're about to miss the turn-off again'

'Oh' He swung the wheel sharply and headed towards Itsea They drove along the main street of the town bordering the sea, its shops and tavernas shaded by ancient pepper trees To her question concerning the detour, Burns replied that he was paying a duty call to the nearby cemetery. He failed to notice the effect his answer had on her As they approached a tiny square she suggested he drop her at a taverna where she'd wait for him

'I have a morbid aversion to such places,' she explained Burns stopped the car to let her out assuring her that he would not be long She watched as he disappeared around a turn, her thick brows drawn together in a frown Her work was going to be cut out for her, she thought as she ordered an *ouzo* and water

It was almost thirty minutes later when he returned As he drove slowly towards where she was waiting, he had to stop to let a cart go by He looked towards the taverna and spotted her at the table under a pepper tree She was not alone Two men, obviously Greek, were deep in conversation with her At the sound of his car being thrown into gear, both men got to their feet and strolled into the taverna

Burns gave it little thought as he parked the car He was still full of the heaviness that had fallen upon him as he'd stood by the flowerless, neglected grave with its small marker and the name Stavros Alexandratos chiselled into it No towering monument on this Greek hero's grave No picture on the tomb, a custom in these parts, no nothing. Yet somehow he felt a strange inexplicable sadness as he'd looked down upon the lonely mound Was he wrong, he'd asked himself, in being so certain that his friend was not buried here? Perhaps

the simplicity of the grace was Stavros's wish? He was that kind of man. But too many things indicated otherwise. Yet they were intangible things at best. He carried his perplexity all the way back with him.

Eleni noted it as he sat down. 'You look grim,' she said softly. 'Was it bad?'

He ordered a whisky. The oppressiveness was hard to shake. 'Cemeteries are always bad. For the living especially.' He tossed down his drink and forced a smile. 'But I noticed you weren't lonely while I was gone.'

'I certainly wasn't. You no sooner were out of sight before an American tourist tried to pick me up.'

Here? You're kidding.'

'I'm not. A really friendly man on the prowl for local market places where he could find bargains. He was on his way to Delphi and turned in here on a hunch. He was quite harmless, though terribly talkative.'

Burns grimaced. 'Did he have a pinkish face that clashed with his yellow sports shirt?'

'That's the one. You know him?'

'He got to me this morning at the Zonar.' Then as an afterthought, 'Who were those Greek men?'

'Just a couple of local fishermen,' Eleni explained that the men had noticed him drive up towards the cemetery, so they used that as an opportunity to tell her all about their resistance hero who they said was buried up there.

'You mean Stavros Alexandratos?' he asked.

'You know of him?'

'I handled his paintings,' Burns told her. 'He was quite a well-known artist and I was his dealer.'

'I see.' They sat in silence for a long while, both wrapped in their own thoughts. Burns broke it finally.

'I had the strangest feeling up there that he was really lying in that grave.' It was as though he were speaking to himself. Eleni looked at him closely.

'That's a perfectly normal feeling, I should think.'

'Not under the circumstances,' he replied 'Up until today I was thoroughly convinced he was still alive. Many things pointed to that fact. But when I stood up there, I had my first doubts.'

'These men I just spoke with didn't seem to have any. They spoke of him as having been killed in an automobile accident.'

Burns thought for a long moment. 'Then what are all those signs I see scrawled on walls around Athens?' He looked around the square. 'There's one over there.'

She looked in the direction he'd pointed and read the words 'STAVROS LIVES' painted on a white, crumbling wall of stone.

'Oh, I've seen that too,' she answered. 'All it means is that the Greeks love their heroes and hate to admit they're gone. They need them and so they keep them alive in this way. It's not to be taken literally.'

'My better sense tells me you're right. And up there I would have agreed with you.' He laughed shortly. 'Don't think I'm out of my mind, but . . . ' He stopped, embarrassed.

'But what?'

'Well . . . it's hard to explain . . . But sitting here with you I'm filled with the sense that he's alive. I can feel him all around me.' He laughed once more. 'Now I can see you do think I'm out of my mind.'

'I don't at all,' she assured him. 'I merely think you've been caught up by Greece and are acting typically Greek. Why shouldn't you fight as hard as you can against admitting the loss of a friend? I think it's wonderful, however . . . '

'What?' he prodded.

'It's wrong to carry it to extremes,' she replied.

Burns let the matter drop. He berated himself for yin as much as he did. Not only because it made him look like sentimental fool, but that it cast a gloomy shadow on their relationship. He suggested they get started for Delphi if they expected to get back to Athens in time for dinner, a tacit agreement that they would dine together that Eleni good-

naturedly acceded to. He paid the check, and as they walked over to where the car was parked, a pair of pig-like eyes stared out of the window of the taverna and watched them drive off. The incredibly fat man got ponderously to his feet and walked out into the bright sunlight towards his own car. All the way to Delphi and back to Athens, he was not too far behind the couple.

9 THE POOR PLAYER

THE SMALL WHITE PEKINGESE lay half suffocated under the vast and clammy armpit. It wriggled even deeper into the warm comforting folds, making tiny asthmatic sounds of ecstasy. The fat man shifted his position to accommodate his dog. Samos Kostandis lay semi-prone on a wide brocaded chaise, his feet encased in brilliant scarlet slippers, and his bulk covered by a loose flowing robe of silken embroidery. The window was open, allowing the soft evening breeze to bring into the room the muted sounds of the street below as well as the tempting odours from a nearby restaurant. Kostandis paid no heed to either of these distractions as he fed the little dog warm milk sweetened with honey from a silver spoon. Disturbing thoughts were interfering with this operation, something he rarely allowed to happen. But that afternoon had been a particularly tiring and confusing one for him. He despised driving to begin with, but having to chase all over the countryside after that fool Burns was more than he could bear. He sighed. In the old days he'd been able to afford some trustworthy assistant to do a chore such as this. But things had changed, and now it was he doing chores for others.

The dog looked up at him with its liquid hyper-thyroid eyes and licked his hand. 'Ah, my little Poopsie,' he murmured, 'you understand poor old Kostis, don't you? You know how

hard it is for me to be forced to work in this manner But let me assure you that if we do our work well, you and I, our employers will amply reward us when their day arrives '

He rolled the little dog over on its back and inspected the smooth pink belly for fleas, depositing the few he found into a glass of water that stood by for that purpose A slim dark-skinned boy about eighteen years of age slipped noiselessly into the room carrying a round copper tray He placed the tray and the small cup of steaming Turkish coffee which it held, upon the table next to the chaise He had to draw his hand back quickly to avoid being bitten by the pekingese Kostandis smiled

'Now, now, Poopsie You mustn't be jealous of Youssef,' he chided the snarling animal 'There's room in Kosti's heart for the two of you So say you're sorry like a good little dog ' He held the dog up close to Youssef, who had to draw back again in order not to get bitten Kostandis roared with laughter

'It's almost time,' the boy said, anger clouding his black, almond-shaped eyes

'Time for what, my pet?'

'For your appointment ' The angry look was replaced now with one of excitement, that extended itself to the fine, almost beautiful features He moved his slim body from side to side causing the gold link-chain around his neck to jingle

Kostandis appraised the boy approvingly 'You're anxious, aren't you, my little hawk? Can't wait for the taste of blood, eh? I like that trait in you It fulfils that lack in me ' His voice hardened, becoming more businesslike, as he told the boy to wait outside when his visitor arrived, and if he performed his assignment well he'd get the beautiful gift that Kostandis brought from America

This time the boy's expressive eyes shone with greed, as his swaying movement increased its rhythm He leaned over towards Kostandis, avoiding the growling dog, and received the moist kiss from his mentor. Then with a graceful shifting

of his slim hips, he undulated from the room, his gold chain swinging joyously

Kostandis watched him go, congratulating himself upon the good fortune bestowed upon him in the shape of this beautiful darling of his. Then, as though this thought would seem disloyal, he embraced the little dog to his ample chest and sank back on to the chaise

'I didn't mean to slight you, my little one,' he cooed. 'It's just that he serves his purpose, and you serve yours. And poor Kosti has need of both.'

As he sipped his coffee he heard the tinkling sound of the doorbell, followed by muffled footsteps crossing the carpeted hallway. The visitor entered the room slowly, almost furtively. A strained politeness coloured their greetings, and Kostandis waved the man to a seat opposite him. Seated in a hunched-over position on the camel-skin covered ottoman, the visitor looked hungrily towards a box of Turkish cigarettes. Kostandis caught the look, and extended his slipper-shod foot to slide the box across the coffee table. With muttered thanks, the man took out a cigarette and lit it, filling the air with the sweet aroma of its tobacco. He relaxed as best he could in the unsupported position in which he was forced to sit.

'Did you have a nice trip?' he inquired in an effort to break the strange silence.

Kostandis nodded.

'Did you enjoy New York? I understand much amusement is to be found there for a man of your tastes.' His leer was knowing.

'I wasn't in New York, my dear Dimitriou,' Kostandis heaved a large sigh as he shifted himself into a more upright position without disturbing the dozing dog.

His eyes narrowed almost to the disappearing point as he focused them upon the nervous man opposite. 'You're a fool, Dimitriou,' he said amiably, his tone contrasting the hardness of his look. 'Do you know that you're a fool?'

Dimitriou concentrated upon the glowing tip of the cigarette he held between nervous fingers. He coughed.

'Obviously you do not,' Kostandis went on. 'And that can be dangerous. For then you try to think for yourself, and that's something a fool must never do. Am I not right?'

Dimitriou kept his expression blandly non-committal, unsure of exactly what was expected of him. Kostandis pressed on, his tone more a match now for his look.

'Am I not right, Dimitriou?' He spaced the words slowly.

'I suppose you are.'

'Of course I am.' The genial tone returned. 'And what makes it even more unforgivable is that in this case the fool was given explicit orders to follow. But did he follow them? No. He chose to follow his own course. Most foolish, wouldn't you say?'

Dimitriou nodded. This time he knew what was expected of him. Kostandis went on. 'A man like that is in no position to act in such a manner, is he? In fact, a man like that is in no position to go on living.'

Dimitriou's mouth fell open, letting a cloud of smoke escape from between his slack lips. His index finger nervously flicked non-existent ash from the tip of the cigarette. Kostandis drew himself up to a full sitting position, ignoring the low complaint from his dog.

'When I instructed you to find out why Richard Burns had come to Athens, did I tell you to go to him directly?' His anger showed clearly now. 'Or did I tell you to go about it in the usual way? To search his room . . . to follow him. Not to pretend to be a policeman, for god's sake. What kind of idiocy was that?'

Dimitriou felt it necessary to defend what he had thought was a brilliant idea. He did so by insisting that to go directly to the source of information was more efficient and trustworthy than to try and deduce what they wanted to know from what might be found among a man's possessions. It seemed quicker to do it as he did. Quicker and with less danger.

of being caught. He couldn't help adding that he felt he'd done a good job in carrying the whole thing off.

'Such a good job,' Kostandis sneered, 'that you were no sooner out of his room, when he put in a call to the police.'

Dimitriou paled. He slumped back into himself as his momentary surge of assurance waned.

Kostandis leaned forward. 'The point I'm trying to make, my dear Dimitriou, is that you're a bumbler and my business has no room for bumlbers who cannot obey orders but insist on thinking for themselves. You have eliminated any usefulness you might have had in regards to Richard Burns by allowing him to know your miserable face. So I have decided to remove you from the game.'

Dimitriou scrambled to his feet, his anger bursting forth. 'What about the money you promised me?' he demanded.

'I suggest you concentrate less on money and more on fear,' Kostandis advised him gently. 'Because it is fear that might ensure your staying alive.' He leaned back on to the pillows, waving one arm in a gesture of tired dismissal. 'Now get out of my sight. I have no more to say to you.'

The angry man glared down at the bulk spread out on the chaise. 'You can't dismiss me like this, Kostandis,' he snarled. 'I know too much about you.'

Kostandis smiled as he closed his eyes. 'Fear is the key word my friend,' he said. 'Just let fear motivate your actions, not revenge. And you might live to be an old man.' He was asleep by the time Dimitriou, with Youssef padding silently behind him, was half-way to the Hotel Grande Bretagne.

'You're a lucky bastard,' Richard Burns informed his smugly grinning reflection in the bathroom mirror. Whatever reasons he'd had for coming to Greece at this particular time, he told himself, they seemed now to have come into being for the sole purpose of having him meet Eleni Harper. She was the first woman in a long time to affect him in this way. The day they had spent had been a delightfully full one, and he looked

forward to their dinner together in less than two hours. He whistled gaily as he put the finishing touches to his blue suede tie, turned away from the mirror and started to put on his shoes. He hadn't thought of Stavros once since leaving Itea thanks to Eleni, and he wondered if that was a good thing or not. For the first time since MacDonald's visit to him in New York, he was unsure about continuing his quest. It was many years since he'd been involved in this kind of intrigue, and it occurred to him that his meeting with Eleni could very well be more of a blessing than he might imagine. The sudden, sharp ring of the telephone intruded upon his thoughts. He grabbed at it quickly, expecting to hear her voice. But he didn't.

'Kyrios Burns?' he heard instead. When he admitted that that's who he was, the voice went on to introduce itself as Police Captain Dimitriou whom he'd met on his first day in Athens. 'Please,' the voice whispered into the phone, 'I must see you.'

'Now?' Burns asked impatiently.

'Yes. It's of much importance to you that I do.'

Although his curiosity to know just who this man really was prodded him, Burns was reluctant to allow this intrusion to spoil his evening. It could wait, he decided. He relayed that thought to his caller.

'No it can't.' The voice was urgent now. 'Look, Kyrie Burns, I lied to you the other day. I'm not with the police.'

'You surprise me.' The heavy sarcasm was lost on his caller.

'I wish to explain everything to you now. Who I work for and why I came to question you. I can explain about Stavros too. And what I have to say can mean your life, Kyrie Burns.'

'Come on up.' Burns slammed down the receiver. A sudden tightening in his stomach warned him that he needed a drink. He poured some scotch into a glass, and allowed the soothing warmth of it to relax the tension. He'd been a bit premature, he mused, to think he could forget what brought him here and concentrate only on playing the romantic bachelor.

Despite the scotch, his nerves were still tingling with long-forgotten excitement. Take it easy, he warned himself, it's too many years since you've played this game. You're no longer a pro.

He glanced at his watch. The man should've been up here by now. Impatiently he strode to the door and opened it. As though on cue, the shrill scream of a woman split the air. It came from the far end of the hallway towards the elevators. He ran in that direction. The woman was still screaming as he shouldered his way through the knot of people staring into the open elevator. The cold, sinking feeling grabbed at his stomach even before he saw it.

The slumped rag doll of a figure with the thin, ornate-handled knife protruding from its chest, seemed to be looking directly at him, its open mouth wordlessly screaming its warning. He turned away. Walking back to his room he realized that like it or not, he'd just lost his amateur standing.

Part Two

'When y Love swears that she is ade of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies '

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
The Sonnets

1 DAUGHTER OF AN OLD FRIEND

BURNS took refuge in the bar, and comfort in two double scotches. Usually crowded at this pre-dinner hour, the place was practically empty now, its former patrons milling about in the lobby watching with morbid curiosity as the blanket-covered corpse was being carried out on a police stretcher. Only Burns had remained where he was when the police arrived. Joining the gaping throng was useless. He knew who the victim was. Or at least he knew who he'd claimed to be. Who he really was, who had sent him, and who had eliminated him were points that would have to be cleared up, he reasoned, if he were to remain healthy.

A couple of days in Athens and already he'd been exposed to danger and intrigue. And romance, he admitted as the thought of Eleni crossed his mind. But the former was uppermost in his thoughts at the moment. A murder had been committed. Practically on his doorstep. Someone didn't want his identity or operation divulged. Didn't want it very badly. And hadn't the so-called Dimitriou warned him that his own life was involved? He had to get moving, he decided. Someone was obviously in more of a hurry than he was. It was almost nine o'clock, and he had more than an hour before meeting Eleni. He debated momentarily whether to cancel the date, but convinced himself that business before pleasure was more to his liking than business instead of it. If he hurried he could

get to Aleco's and back by ten. Someone there would know where he could get word to Stavros. The fact that Nikos had chosen the old place as their rendezvous proved that. He'd get a message to Stavros telling him that he had to see him. He had more to tell him now than when he'd left New York. There was little doubt in his mind that this murder was connected with his mission here. The decision to go into action improved his spirits immediately. He'd allowed the Mediterranean indolence to get hold of him too securely, and now he'd shake it off and get the ball rolling. As he was about to pay his bill, a voice sounded behind him.

'A pair of scotches, please,' the voice ordered. Burns swung around to stare into the face of Charles Caldwell.

'You'll join me, won't you, Mr Burns?' he asked. 'All that excitement out there has made me thirsty.'

Burns didn't try too hard to hide his annoyance. 'I've already quenched mine. Thanks all the same.'

'Just a quick one then.'

'Sorry, but I must be off. Some other time.' Goddamn it, he thought, why is it every time I turn around I look into that pink face? He paid his bill and walked out through the lobby, ignoring the buzzing excitement that filled the air.

Through twisting narrow streets, dimly lit and silent, Burns hurried towards the small alley near Kolonaki Square. There, at the end of a line of close-packed houses up against a wall of old stones, was the hemmed-in little taverna called Aleco's. He pushed through curtained entry and heard a bell sound in the back where the kitchen was. No one came from behind the partition, so he sat down at a table and studied the menu. He was aware that eyes were studying him from behind a curtain that hung over the small window cut into the wooden partition. Then after a few moments, a man padded heavily towards his table. A short squat man with thick greying hair, broad calloused hands and darting black eyes that seemed to bore right into Burns. He wore an apron around his middle.

'*Kali spera, sas,*' he muttered. Burns returned the greeting.

and ordered some *retzina*. A few minutes later the man returned with the drink and stood stolidly alongside the table waiting for the order. Burns studied the man carefully. He didn't recognize him from the past, nor had he seen him when he'd come here to meet Nikos. Could he trust him, he wondered. He took the chance.

'I wish to get a message to Zeus,' he said quietly without taking his eyes from the menu.

The man's eyes were expressionless. 'Then it is Mount Olympus you want, *Kyrle*. Not this taverna.'

Burns held the man's look. Then he removed his address book from his pocket, tore out a page and scrawled on it in Greek the words 'Apollo has returned and must make contact.' He folded the paper and handed it to the man watching him.

'Then would you be so kind as to deliver this for me to Mount Olympus. I'm not sure I know where it is.'

The man unfolded the paper, glanced at the words written on it, then refolded it carefully. Without a word he went back into the kitchen. Burns could hear the low murmur of voices, then a telephone call being made. He sipped his wine, not a word of the one-sided conversation was distinguishable to him. He didn't try to listen. He waited, as despite himself his heart thumped in his chest. The man returned and handed back the folded paper, informing Burns that the drink was on the house. Burns thanked him formally, pocketed the paper unread, and walked out into the dark street.

By the flickering glow from his cigarette lighter he read the words printed in large letters on the back of his own note. Mount Olympus was an address in the Plaka district, and his appointment was for five the following day. He held the paper to the flame and watched it disappear as the breeze caught the ash.

In a little less than twenty-four hours he would see Stavros. The thought excited him. He was excited as well by the knowledge that he would finally come to grips with the

mystery that had been teasing him. He grinned as he walked. Leave it to Stavros to indulge in the unorthodox and the unexpected. Whatever it was he was up to, he was still operating in the old way. As he started to turn the corner at the far end of the deserted street, he was thrust backward by the impact of a body catapulting into him. Instinctively, he grabbed the body close to himself and flattened against the wall of a building. He stared down into the fear-whitened eyes of Coco Phillips.

'Oh, Mr Burns,' she gasped breathlessly as she recognized him, 'am I glad to see you.'

Burns grinned wryly. 'I'm indeed flattered, Miss Phillips. And am I to gather that you've been spending all this energy in searching me out?'

She wriggled slightly in his arms, reminding him of their closeness. He relaxed his grip. 'Not exactly,' she answered without stepping back. 'But that doesn't take away from the fact that I've never been so glad to see a familiar face before in my life.'

In short, choppy sentences she went on to explain that she'd come down to this part of town to keep an appointment with a Greek friend, and when she'd got to the more deserted part of Athens she discovered that someone was following her. At first she thought she was imagining it, but after a few minutes it became unmistakable. She panicked and began to run without noticing whether or not the person behind her was running as well. Then she bumped into him. Burns took her arm and swung her around.

'Come on,' he said, 'let's see if you're right or just letting your imagination run away with you.'

'But what if he's there?'

'We'll ask him what he's up to. That's the best way to discourage a tail.'

She looked up at him in surprise. The casual manner in which he said it, and his choice of words, did not strike her as the language an art dealer would use. She said as much.

'I read a lot,' was his retort 'Come along'

'But my appointment,' she protested

'You've been stood up There's no one at the taverna'

Coco kept silent This man was full of surprises How did he know she was going to the taverna? She decided to be more careful with him in future, and allowed him to lead her back in the direction from which she'd so abruptly come

There was no one in sight when they turned the corner They crossed over the badly paved street and continued along another narrowly winding one, their footsteps echoing hollowly Suddenly he pulled her to a halt He listened All around them the darkness was deathly quiet They began walking, but after taking a few steps he once again pulled her to a stop This time it was unmistakable From somewhere behind them they heard the muffled sound of other footsteps also coming to a sudden stop Coco looked at him with wide eyes Burns nodded, signalling her to keep quiet They started walking at a faster pace, crossing another street into a wider one He was almost dragging the girl along The sound of footsteps behind them could be heard more clearly now They were heard to go slowly when Burns and the girl went slowly, and rapidly when they ran Once when they stopped and turned to look back they saw the shadow of a man duck into a doorway

Burns was worried Not for himself so much as for the girl In the old days he would've confronted the tail, but that was a long time ago and he hesitated now Besides, if it turned out to be a double tail, the girl might get hurt His better sense told him to continue on to the Grande Bretagne and lose him there Criss-crossing back and forth, they finally came to Syn-tagma Square But curiosity got the better of his caution His fingers tightened on her arm

'Take a deep breath,' his whispered 'We're going to make a run for it across the street until we get to those cars parked over there' He pointed 'Let's go'

With his fingers still gripping her arm they broke into a run and took off through the crowd to the far end of the street As

they came to the parked cars, Burns suddenly stopped and bent down to look into the rearview mirror of one of them. He saw a man duck into an open doorway. 'Come on,' he said to Coco, 'let's flush our bird and see what he's up to.'

Feeling confident since they were no longer on a deserted street, he strode up to the doorway in which he'd seen his man disappear. They walked past it a few feet before he whirled around and met the man coming out. Burns grabbed him by the loose part of his shirt and pulled him close. He kept his left hand in his pocket, the fingers stabbing realistically into the other man's ribs.

'All right,' he said in a low voice. 'Let's hear it.' He was staring into the face of a slim, dark-skinned boy about eighteen years of age. The boy, obviously Turkish, was caught off guard and for a split second was at a loss for a reply. He recovered quickly however.

'Hear what, *Kyrios sas*?' he asked in accented Greek.

'Your reason for following this young lady.'

The boy became apologetic. Over-apologetic, Burns thought, as he haltingly explained how he'd noticed the lovely young foreigner wandering all by herself, and the thought had struck him that perhaps she'd want a guide. But then when he saw she had someone to escort her, he decided to follow her back to her hotel so that he would be waiting for her the next day to offer his services.

Burns stared deep into the bottomless blackness of the boy's eyes during his recitation. It sounded logical enough in its stumbling shyness, and he had to admit it was delivered with convincing sincerity. He would almost have believed it had he not felt the unmistakable shape of a knife at the boy's waist just about where his finger was pressing. He tightened his hold at the slim, brown neck. 'It's a good story,' he said. 'But I don't believe it. And now I advise you to believe me. If I ever see you anywhere near this young lady again, I shall kill you. Do you think I mean what I say?'

'Yes, *Kyrios sas*.'

Burns shoved the boy from him 'That's very wise of you,' he said. Then, taking Coco by the arm again he led her slowly towards the brightly lit entrance of the Grande Bretagne. Despite his outward appearance of calm, his heart beat wildly during the brief encounter 'Not at all used to this sort of thing,' he explained 'I hope I was convincing enough.'

'You convinced me,' she replied, 'do you believe his story?'

Burns had no reason to disbelieve it other than the presence of the hidden knife, and even that didn't signify anything. He nodded at her 'It sounded plausible enough. What other reason could he have?'

'None,' she replied shortly. She hoped that this time it was her turn to sound convincing.

Crossing the hotel lobby towards the elevators, Coco asked him to accompany her to her room. 'I'm still a bit shaky,' she offered as explanation. Riding up in the elevator Burns looked down, noticing that the bloodstains of his unfortunate visitor had been scrubbed away. The thought of that occurrence made him suddenly wonder if there might have been more to the little adventure he'd just had. Had he made a mistake in thinking that it was Coco who was being followed? He glanced down at his watch. It was already after ten and he was late for his dinner appointment with Eleni. He'd see Coco to her room, then go right down to Eleni's. He looked forward with relief to a pleasant meal with her, removed from the intrigues he'd been going through the past couple of hours.

They walked down the hallway to her room, and he bid her good night while she fumbled with the key. The lock clicked, the door swung open and he turned away. Her stifled scream made him turn back. Over her shoulder as she stood paralysed in the doorway he looked into the brightly lit room. It was a mess. Every drawer had been emptied and its contents strewn over the floor. Her clothing tossed about, the bedclothes disarrayed, the mattress cut open. There wasn't a suitcase, a box, or even a jar of face cream that hadn't been examined.

Staring at it, the thought crossed Burns's mind that he had

been wrong again in surmising that the kid was following him. This little girl standing here was not the innocent broad she appeared to be. If someone could do this to her room, then someone else could also follow her through the streets of Athens with a knife in his belt. He turned to her in time to see her hand move to her breast in a quick gesture of reassurance. It dropped to her side when she saw him look in her direction. He pretended not to notice.

'I think the police ought to be notified,' he said as he walked to the phone.

'What for?'

'Well, my dear Miss Phillips, it seems to me that someone is making it quite clear that he's interested in you. And not just romantically as that young Turk wanted us to believe.'

Coco pushed some clothing off a chair and sat down. She lit a cigarette, trying to mask her nervousness with the action of doing so. 'You think the two things are tied in?' Her tone was little-girlish despite her effort to make it matter-of-fact.

'Do you?'

'This could be an attempt at robbery,' she replied. Burns got the impression she said it more to convince herself than him.

'Do you have anything worth robbing?' he asked. Again that unconscious movement to her breast. This time her fingers remained there and nervously played with the buttons of her blouse.

'I'll call the desk and have someone come to clean up,' she said with sudden firmness. 'I've kept you long enough, Mr Burns. And I don't know how to thank you for all you've done.'

An exit cue if ever I've heard one, Burns told himself. Whatever it is she's got on her, she wants me gone so that she can check it. And her gratitude doesn't go so far as to trust me to know what it is. And considering how important it obviously is to other people, I'm not so sure I want to know. He smiled as he thought all this. He had quite enough of his own intrigues not to need to get involved in this girl's. He walked towards the door.

'I suggest you keep your door locked,' he said as he turned back to her 'And if I'm not being impertinent, may I also suggest that whatever it is you have tucked away in that charming hideout ' he pointed to her well-shaped breasts, 'you take it right down and lock it in the hotel safe '

'Good night, Mr Burns And thanks for the advice '

For no other reason that he could fathom, other than perhaps to puncture the cool and guarded manner she drew around her like a cloak, he smiled down at her and said, 'Good night, Fanni Kilalis Did anyone ever tell you that you resemble your mother?' He was more than halfway down the hallway before he heard the door slam shut

2 CONFESSIONS

'ALL RIGHT, RICHARD,' Eleni said when they finished dinner, 'want to tell me what it is that's made you so pre-occupied?'

He didn't try to hide his surprise I guess I haven't been too successful at pretending, have I?' It was an obvious stall, and Eleni sensed it at once She decided not to pursue the matter any further since he seemed reluctant to talk about it

'Men aren't usually as adept as women are at that game,' she replied lightly

'Do I detect a hint that there are some games men are good at?' Burns asked, glad to pick up the cue

'It's more than a hint ' Her expression grew serious 'Unfortunately there are quite a few '

'Why unfortunately?'

'Because they are the wrong games And they lead too often to war, death and destruction' She noticed the effect her words had, and smiled to ease the tension 'Surprised you, didn't I?'

Burns admitted that she had, and wondered to himself if

she'd picked up on his own mood Eleni toyed with her coffee cup as she continued in a low voice

'You forget I'm Greek And Greeks live with those things It's part of our heritage'

You amaze me, you know,' Burns said

'Do I? That's nice'

'All afternoon you were the wide-eyed American tourist, and now suddenly you show the morbid Greek side You keep one off-balance'

'That's always an advantage, isn't it?' Her tone turned light again

'And an unfair one I've told you all about myself, and now find that I know absolutely nothing about you Not a sound way in which to begin a relationship, you know'

Eleni's eyebrows raised in feigned surprise 'Is that what we're beginning?' she asked archly

Burns didn't know quite how to reply to her question, so he chose to remain silent Eleni finished her coffee and pushed the cup and saucer from her

'All right,' she said 'Let's walk back to the hotel and I'll fill you in. There's a bottle of *ouzo* in my room we can open'

As they walked she sketched out her story She told in short, simple sentences about her mother who was Greek, and her father who was American and was with the American embassy in Athens when she was born Her childhood was a happy one, and she was devastated when her father was rotated back to Washington just before the war broke out in Greece She'd spent the war years in Virginia always homesick for Athens Her father had died a few months after war's end, and her mother three years later Feeling completely at loose ends, she'd decided to return to Greece and try to pick up her life That was in 1949 She remained until almost two years ago when she'd returned to Washington

Her résumé was finished as they crossed the lobby of the Grande Bretagne 'Now I'm back,' she concluded, 'I'm still at loose ends, trying to decide what to do with my future'

Burns was formulating some pretty definite ideas concerning that, but thought better of voicing them at this time. There was one thing he had to make certain of 'Ever married?' he asked casually as they entered her room.

Her voice was low as she replied 'Yes. But he died.' She walked over to the drapes and drew them closed. 'And you?' She had her back to him as she spoke.

'The same. Strange, isn't it?' The moment was suddenly filled with a solemnity that neither could shake. Eleni poured out two fingers of *ouzo* in small glasses and watched it turn milky as she added water. She handed him his glass and sat beside him on the divan.

'And now what?' Burns asked, breaking the heavy silence.

She shrugged expressively. 'Time passes and one manages somehow to keep occupied. To fill the emptiness while waiting.' She sipped her drink reflectively. 'What about you?' she asked.

'What about me?' Burns pondered the softly asked question. As he did so, he was struck by two clear revelations. The first was that as he sat here the past was slipping away from him, and he was at last bidding goodbye to it and to Kita. The second was that he was falling in love with this beautiful woman sitting alongside of him.

Carefully he chose his words, and in bits and pieces as it came to him, he told her the details of his life—the specifics he'd omitted that afternoon. He told her of his friendship with Stavros, of how they fought together during the Civil War, of Kita, their marriage and her death. He skimmed over his life away from Greece in order to elaborate on his reasons for returning at this time. He explained his suspicions concerning Stavros's alleged death, told her about the so-called Captain Dimitriou, and brought her up to date with the events surrounding Coco Phillips.

Once he got started it poured out of him in a flow, while her eyes responded to all he said in eloquent silence. When he finished, she rose from the divan and walked to the window.

She drew the drape aside and stared out into the night. Her voice was low when she spoke, masking the turmoil she felt.

'You said that when you were in the hills with the Andartes, you all had chosen code names. What was yours?'

'Apollo.'

Apollo. She turned and went back to the divan and sat down. In silence she refilled their glasses. 'Quite a story,' she said at last. 'One would never think to look at you that you've gone through so much.'

Burns grinned. 'I don't know just how to take that.'

'I meant no harm,' she apologized, then quickly changed the subject. 'So you're here now because you're convinced your artist friend is alive?'

Burns nodded. 'That's right.'

Eleni leaned forward slightly. 'But hasn't it occurred to you that you may be doing exactly what he doesn't want done? That in searching for him at this time you may endanger all that he's trying to do?'

'Well, when I finally see him, I don't intend to advertise the fact.'

'I'm sure of that,' she replied. 'But there's always the possibility you'll find out more than you're looking for.'

'If I do, I'll know how to handle the information. Don't worry.'

'I can't help it, but I am. You said you think you're being watched. What if you lead them to Stavros? Think of the danger. To both of you.'

'I do. All the time. That's why I'm careful.' He took her hands in his and got to his feet, pulling her up with him. He kissed her pale cheek lightly. 'It'll turn out all right, you'll see.' He held her close.

Eleni had to force herself to say it, and did so quickly in order not to have the time to change her mind. 'I'm sorry, Richard,' she murmured against his shoulder, 'but I wish you'd give up this quixotic search of yours.' Then her arms went around his neck as her mouth responded hungrily to his.

3 THE GENERAL

SAMOS KOSTANDIS entered the sparsely furnished office feeling ill at ease. He berated himself for it. In the old days he was always master of a situation, but lately . . . He tried to allay his nervousness by fingering the amber beads secreted in his pocket. The General used a room in a small hotel near the railroad station on Constantin Paleologou street for his office. It was the sort of transient hotel in which he or his visitors would go unnoticed. It served his purpose well, and was known to few people in Athens. The phone call from this room roused Kostandis out of bed a full two hours before his usual time to awaken. His sleepy grumbling at this untoward intrusion upon his comfort was cut off by the peremptory summons that shocked him to wakefulness.

'Come in,' the harsh voice said without any preliminaries, taking for granted he'd know who was calling. 'It's time we had a little talk.'

It was the curt brevity of the call that made Kostandis nervous, and the feeling mounted all the way down in the taxi. He closed the door behind him now, and forced a smile to his face as he stepped fully into the room. His appearance radiated bland self-confidence, all of his apprehension concentrated on the beads in his pocket.

'Good morning, General,' he said as affably as he could manage under the circumstances.

It was a large room, and was dominated by an oversized desk. Behind it there stood a high-backed wooden chair, and in front of it were three smaller versions of the same. In the corner was an American-styled water cooler. The floor was bare of any rug or carpeting, and the shutters on the single window were shut, giving the room a night-time dimness. On the desk a small lamp cast its shaded beam of light on a neat pile of papers and folders, while the man seated in the tall

chair studied the contents of an open folder. His head was bent and Kostandis could see that he was wearing horn-rimmed sunglasses.

The General ignored Kostandis's greeting and presence, seemingly concentrating all of his attention on the papers before him, turning them over from time to time. He never once looked up. Kostandis remained standing at the door, nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other as the perspiration gathered in droplets around his collar. Finally, the General closed the manila folder with a quick decisive movement of his hand that caused Kostandis to bring himself to an attitude of attention. But he was still ignored.

Affecting much preoccupation with the procedure, the General reached into a small lacquered box, removed a cigarette, and lit it with an ordinary wooden match. Kostandis waited. After enjoying two deep lungfuls of tobacco smoke, the General raised his head and directed his attention towards his visitor. Although dressed in civilian clothes, his entire manner was military, his head, neck and spine ramrod stiff, his movements at a minimum. It was the fact that his eyes were hidden behind the dark glasses, and the expression in them unknown, that filled Kostandis with a fearful apprehension that crumbled his insides.

'Well, Kostandis, what have you to report?' His heavy voice was toneless and businesslike. Kostandis cringed inwardly as he always did upon hearing the man's uneducated accent. It could easily be considered comic were it not for the fact that nothing about this man could be considered in any way humorous.

'It's still a bit early, sir,' he began by way of excuse. 'After all, he just got here.'

'But he didn't waste time, did he?' the General shot back at him. 'He's already made contact according to your other sources of information, and is at present sitting tight waiting for something. And the woman too is biding her time. And what have you done meanwhile?' His voice rose angrily into

else is interested in your quarry beats you to it again' He turned his attention back to the pile of foldes before him, and opened one of them

Kostandis mumbled an unheard goodbye, then backed out of the room, closing the door softly behind him. Once in the hallway he brought forth his large handkerchief and furiously mopped the perspiration from around his neck and face. He understood only too well the threat implicit in the General's words

4 AULD LANG SYNE

BURNS left the hotel a full thirty minutes before his appointment. At first he thought he might take the long but pleasant walk to Plaka, but decided against it at the last moment as he noticed an empty taxi that had just discharged its passengers in front of the entrance. He climbed in and gave as his destination the Cathedral which was not too far from the address he'd been given. They no sooner joined the stream of traffic when the thought struck him that he would've made better time had he followed his original idea to walk. He'd read somewhere that Tokyo and Mexico boasted the worst traffic in the world, and wondered how much worse than Athens they could be. He lit a cigarette and leaned his head back on the seat letting his mind dwell on the fact that within a half-hour he'd be face to face with Stavros. After all these years. He wondered if he'd changed any since last they'd met in Paris.

His taxi threaded its way through the press of other cars away from Syntagma Square down Amalias Street. As they waited for the stop light to change, Burns casually looked out of the side window at the car waiting alongside. The driver was a beautiful, dark-haired woman whose looks brought his thoughts around to Eleni and last night. He smiled as he contemplated what might develop between them. Despite the

complications that had arisen from his headstrong decision to come to Athens, his meeting with Eleni Harper was making it all worthwhile. The thought of complications led his mind back to his approaching meeting, and he wondered whether he was being followed. He turned and glanced out of the back window. Directly behind was another taxi. The light changed and his own started off with a lurch.

At the corner of Souris some of the other automobiles turned off, but the taxi was still close behind. He tried to make out its passenger, but all he could see was a figure holding a newspaper in front of its face. No doubt it had a pair of eyeholes in it, he reasoned as a frown crossed his face. If he were being tagged then there was one way to find out. He leaned forward in his seat. 'Turn right at the next corner,' he instructed his driver.

The corner came up quickly and they took it sharply, their wheels bouncing over the kerb. As they straightened out, Burns looked back. The other taxi was still on their tail but a little further back. As it closed in on them, he saw that the newspaper was still in place. He hitched his body closer to the dividing window and began issuing rapid-fire orders. They swung right on Peta down to Adrianou which was the main street to the Plaka area where he should be getting out. Instead he told the driver to keep going to Eolou and head up to Omonia Square. This was in the completely opposite direction and should settle whether or not he was being tagged. For no one going from Syntagma to Omonia would head first towards Plaka. That is, unless he was following someone who did just that. As they joined with the traffic on Eolou Burns looked back. The other taxi was still there although two small cars had managed to get between them. That settled it. Burns swore under his breath. He'd have to be flushed as it would be dangerously stupid to lead whoever it was behind that newspaper right up to the door of the meeting place. And there was no time now to force the issue by coming face to face with his tail. He started talking to his driver.

They then executed a series of sudden swerving turns into side streets, backtracking once then coming to an abrupt halt at the corner of Zinonos after circling the Square. Burns left the taxi, certain he'd lost his pursuer in the traffic he'd been led into in the busy Square. He dashed across the street, got into another taxi going in the opposite direction, and was soon back on Eolou heading towards Plaka. Just to make doubly sure, he switched taxis on Vissis and drove back to Adrianou. He alighted in front of the Cathedral and spent the next five minutes acting like a tourist.

The Plaka area of Athens doesn't come to life until almost nine o'clock in the evening, so it was easy to see if he were being followed. A quick glance in all directions assured Burns that he had successfully eluded his tail. He strolled casually down Mitropoleos Street towards the address he'd been given. When he reached it, he deliberately walked past it for about fifty yards then turned around to retrace his steps. There was no one in sight that could possibly arouse his suspicion. He walked up to the door and knocked. It was opened halfway by a woman who looked at him inquiringly without saying a word.

'I'm expected,' Burns said. The door remained at its forty-five degree angle. 'My name's Apollo,' he added. The door opened and he stepped inside.

The woman motioned him to follow her as she padded along a dimly-lit hallway with closed doors on either side. At the end of the hall was a staircase. She paused at the foot of it and indicated for him to go up. As he did so, she disappeared behind one of the closed doors.

A man in a dark turtle-necked sweater and heavy corduroy trousers was waiting for him at the head of the stairs. It wasn't until he was almost up to him that Burns could make out his face.

It was a powerfully chiselled countenance that he stared into. Middle-aged yet still showing evidence of what had been youthful handsomeness. Beneath the iron-grey hair was a deeply grooved forehead and the black eyes that went with

the dark quick-silver good looks that is essentially Greek Burns's face broke into a wide smile as he recognized the man, and his hand shot out to meet the one thrust towards him. The handshake immediately developed into an affectionate bear-hug.

'*Philoxenia* Apollo *Philoxenia* Richard' The man's voice was husky with sincere emotion.

'Mino old friend' was all Burns could get out. Had he ever thought he'd see this man again, or for that matter any of those people with whom he'd lived under such dangerous and intensely personal conditions? Yet here he was embracing one of them and hearing once again that untranslatable word of greeting.

'I would know you anywhere even if I were not expecting you,' Mino was saying. 'You've managed to remain young-looking, although your eyes have aged a little. Am I wrong?'

Burns laughed. 'It's the bad light we're standing in,' Mino flung his arms round Burns's shoulders and led him into a large room. More embraces and greetings overwhelmed him as his eyes leaped from one man to another. Kostas, Alexis, Argyri . . . Athanassis . . . Taikis . . . Each face brought with it a separate and singular memory. Alexis . . . Burns could remember clearly the exact moment he'd got that scar that bisected his left cheek. Older and stockier, but his smile still as ready, the joy of life bubbling in his every gesture. And Kostas . . . still painfully thin, never seeming to be able to get over the time spent in the German prison camp. Athanassis as enigmatic as ever, and Argyri, Mino's brother and almost look-alike. These men were all in their early twenties when he'd first met them, and now in their middle age they were still together. Still struggling for a free and democratic Greece.

His heart was full as he allowed himself to be guided to the seat of honour at the head of the table, and *metaxa* was poured into waiting glasses. The filled glasses were then held out towards one another, but the toast was a silent one. Each man had his own manner of thinking what was doubtless the

same wish Burns downed the sharply sweet liquor as his glance once again roamed over his friends. These men had been with him at his wedding, and again at Kita's funeral. They were bound together by the past, and by Greece. And each one of them had left a bit of himself in both.

Mino broke the silence, his full sensuous lips revealing strong, white teeth in a smile as he began his speech of welcome. With great eloquence he told Burns how often they had spoken of him, wishing he'd found some measure of happiness in his life. The words he used were words of warmth and affection, as he spoke, Greece in all its potent beauty rushed upon Burns in a flood. Mino was their spokesman, in the old days and still. Mino who should by all rights have been a poet with nothing else to do but sit amid the beauties of his country and compose his rhymes. His passion was rooted firmly in the soil of Greece, and he had a way of speaking of it that brought it excitingly to life. But the poet in him took second place to the fighter, and came out only on occasions such as this one.

Burns had forgotten what a power the man had with words, and he glowed with the pleasure of listening to him again. The others sat entranced, their expressions seeming to say, 'There he goes again, our Demosthenes.'

At last his welcome came to an end, and while the glasses were refilled and drained it was Burns's turn to answer the questions they were all eager to put to him. When everyone had been brought up to date, a relaxed silence fell over them. During it Mino's piercing eyes caught and held Burns's brooding ones. 'What is it, Richard?' he asked. 'What is the question I see in your eyes that you're not voicing?'

Burns seized the opening. 'There is one who is missing from this table,' he said slowly. 'One I was hoping to see. Why isn't he with us?'

Mino's eyes grew serious. 'Surely you've heard of his death?' he asked.

'I've heard of it.' His tone was flat. The other men ex-

changed glances, swiftly and silently Alexis was the first to speak

'I see you've heard the rumours as well' he murmured

'I have,' Burns answered him 'And I don't believe them to be only rumours'

'Oh And what do you believe the talk you've heard to be?' Argyri asked softly

'The truth'

'Is it this then that has brought you back to Greece?' Mino inquired Burns told them that it was The silence fell upon them again, broken this time by Kostas

'Why should you think Stavros would pretend to be dead?' he questioned

Burns took a deep breath and let it out slowly 'Because I think it might be expedient at the moment for the government, and perhaps other forces as well, to believe him dead'

Once again the men looked at each other Burns waited 'You think that perhaps we are planning something?' Athanassis asked

The thought occurred to me,' Burns admitted

And is that why you wish to see Stavros?' Mino asked To join us? That is if we were planning something,' he added with a smile

The directness of the question caught Burns unawares, and stunned him by the implication which lay behind it Not having given any thought to this possibility, he had no ready answer It was something that would have to be weighed very carefully in light of all that had happened to him since his arrival in Athens He couldn't bring himself to give a negative reply, and a positive one needed thought So he stalled.

'I've been away much too long, Mino,' he said 'There's a lot I would need to know before I can answer your question'

Mino darted inquiring looks at his companions, waiting for a nod of assent from each one before speaking He chose his words carefully, for it was their country and their lives that was being explained His soft voice filled the room

'It's true, Richard,' he began 'You've been away from Greece a long time But you've been in the world, and you must know what has happened to our country' An edge of bitterness crept into his tone 'This country where democracy was born and has now died You must know and the world must also know But everyone ignores Only a handful of us here and abroad keep up the fight These colonels who rule us with their military way of thinking have made our poor land lean and bare when it could be lush and fruitful They cannot run the country without the use of oppression and suppression We need agrarian reform proper medical services for all decent low-cost housing good wages enough food and universities where learning is treasured instead of stifled' He paused as he collected his thoughts 'All these criminals know is force Greece's best men and women are either in prison camps, dead or in exile Our political thinkers, our artists, our musicians our scholars dead or silenced The King sits in his comfortable villa in Italy, and spends his time going to parties and night clubs Which is all right with us as nobody wants him back anyway Neither the colonels nor the people Thank God Papandreou is free, for around him is built our hopes and our struggle With him we have the chance to return to democracy and parliamentary rule'

He paused to refill his glass, and Burns used that moment to express what was on his mind 'But, Mino,' he said, his voice heavy with sadness, 'it's over six years They're solidly entrenched by now, and it becomes more and more impossible Except for a few sporadic acts and student unrest, there's no organized resistance that I can see It hurts me to say this, old friend, but it's the truth.'

Mino digested his words for a long while before replying 'It's the truth and it isn't the truth,' he said 'For we are the Resistance And we are organized After all, Richard, it took years to build up a Resistance in France, here, and other countries under the Nazi tyranny It's a slow process and

lessons were learned Papandreou himself said in an interview once "the streets of Athens are peaceful, but so were the streets of Paris in 1942" And lately ours aren't that peaceful. More and more the students are protesting, and their voices are being heard in high places Bombs have been thrown and assassinations attempted . . '

Burns interrupted 'But nothing accomplished except harsher restrictions All those actions failed in what they were expected to accomplish '

Mino smiled 'A succession of small failures can sometimes add up to one big success '

'The usual Greek optimism ' Burns smiled back at his friend 'I can't fight it '

'Then don't It's what keeps us going We want freedom and we mean to get it no matter how long the struggle ' He paused before going on, and when he did so his voice was so low Burns had to strain to hear his words 'And if some of us have to die for it ' He shrugged and left the rest of his sentence unspoken

'But Papadopoulos has promised to hold elections soon,' Burns protested 'And he's released a great many of the political prisoners on the islands Isn't that an indication that perhaps freedom and reforms might just possibly come about without your death?'

'Richard, Richard ' Mino shook his head sadly from side to side 'How is it you're so naive? What's happened to you? Don't you realize it's all show? A gesture to get foreign capital investment in order to prop up Greece's failing economy and perhaps be accepted into the European Common Market To say nothing of the sop it can be to the United States who like to think they support only Democracies '

Then his voice grew serious again 'Listen to me, Richard. There are people in this government powerful people who are not at all pleased with Papadopoulos's so-called liberalization policies, whatever the reasons for them. People even more right-wing than he is, who think he's gone soft

Do you think for one moment they'll permit him to have his elections? Even if he plans to rig them again, they won't stand for it'

Burns lit a cigarette and sighed deeply 'Poor Greece,' he muttered

'Yes, poor Greece indeed,' Mino agreed 'And poor us, poor Centre Union, poor Papandreou with his dream of a modern and independent country'

'Where will it all end?' Burns asked sadly after a long silence 'And when?'

'It will end with the people's eventual victory, of course,' Mino replied 'It has to Even if the struggle is a long one we will get our democracy back And even if we must do it by ourselves You ask when? When we end it'

A prolonged silence hung over the room as each of the men present thought about what had been said there Burns was especially moved as he recalled all that these brave men had gone through during the past thirty years A lifetime

'What about Stavros?' he asked, breaking the silence 'Where does he fit into all this?'

Once again Mino looked to the others for leave to speak The permission was silently given, and he leaned towards Burns across the table 'None of us has seen him since the accident,' he said 'But we receive messages from him We get money and arms because of his efforts The authorities and the power-hungry ones believe him to be dead, and he prefers it that way More freedom of action I imagine But the people think otherwise They sense his presence and await his return to rally them once again in the struggle'

'Do you know where he is?'

'Not exactly'

'Then how do you get the messages?'

'His wife is his courier'

Burns got impatient 'Then I must see her at once,' he said 'I must warn him'

'About what?'

Burns explained what had occurred in New York that led him to come to Athens. He recounted his suspicions concerning MacDonald's motives with the painting, and his encounter with Dimitriou. He told them of his own theory that there were some people in high places who didn't fall for the so-called accident. And that they were quietly looking for him for their own ends. And whatever those ends might be, he was certain they wouldn't be favourable to those of Stavros. Therefore, he concluded, he must be warned.

Mino assured him that his warning would be relayed to Stavros through the usual channels. 'Meanwhile,' he added as he rose to his feet, 'give thought to the question I asked of you before. We need your help, Richard. We need friends as much as we need money and arms. It would be good if we could tell Stavros that you've come back.'

Burns promised he would, and then as Mino held out his hand, realized that the meeting was at an end. He stood up. The others did likewise and accompanied him to the door.

'Please don't come back here,' Mino cautioned. 'We'll get word to you when it's necessary. If you decide to leave Greece, drop a message at Aleco's.'

Burns shook hands with each man in turn as good-byes were said. The atmosphere had changed since his entrance. It was heavy and sombre now, caused by the words Mino had spoken. Out in the hall once more, he made his way down the darkened staircase where the woman was waiting. She held the door open for him as he walked out into the lengthening shadows of evening.

He walked slowly towards the Cathedral, his brain a turmoil. What disturbed him most was the question Mino had put to him, and its answer he knew they were expecting. He'd never asked this question of himself, and now he wondered whether it had always been there. Had even been subconsciously behind his coming here as he did. Yet even if it had, there were complications now. There was Eleni. After all these years he had a chance of happiness, and he didn't

want history to repeat itself as far as that was concerned. It was the answer he'd once given to this same question that eventually led to his losing Kita, and the same answer could do the same now with Eleni. He couldn't risk it. But could he risk losing his friends, his beliefs or his self-respect? The answer to these came no more readily than did the answer to the one posed by Mino. He walked slowly back to the Grande Bretagne unmindful of the crowds in the streets.

In the room he'd just left, the men sat quietly sipping their drinks. Burns's visit had disturbed them. They didn't know exactly what to make of his sudden appearance among them after such a long absence, yet they couldn't bring themselves to mistrust him. He had once been too much a part of their lives for that. Yet questions did arise in their minds unbidden. Questions they didn't enjoy pondering. Was his story true, or was he searching for Stavros for the same reasons he'd said the others were? Would they be falling into a trap if they trusted him? Before any of these doubts could be voiced, a door that connected to an adjoining room opened. Eleni Harper walked in and sat down in the chair that had been Burns's.

'I thought I told you to convince him that Stavros was dead,' she said sharply.

Mino's glance held hers steadily. 'I couldn't bring myself to lie to Apollo,' he told her. 'I trust him.'

'It's not a matter of trust,' Eleni replied. 'It's a matter of security. It's not what we were told to do.'

'I don't think I did the wrong thing,' Mino said.

'We'll see,' she replied.

5 A JOB TO DO

IN HIS HOTEL ROOM Burns began pacing restlessly, his long walk back in no way alleviating the confusion he felt. He wanted desperately to see Eleni, and was disappointed when he'd returned to find that she'd been out all afternoon. He paced, smoked and watched the clock until past eight-thirty, at which time he went down to the lobby. He met her as she came in. She explained that she'd been visiting old friends and lost all track of time. He noticed that she seemed unusually preoccupied as he accompanied her back upstairs, and as she brought him a tray of *ouzo* and water, he mentioned the fact.

'I'm tired,' she said in response. 'Renewing old ties does that to me.' She sipped her drink. 'I feel more relaxed in America, somehow. In Greece the truth comes up to face me.'

'And what is the truth?'

She smiled. 'That I'm more Greek than I think.'

'That certainly shouldn't depress you.'

'It brings a responsibility with it.'

Burns felt he couldn't agree more. Even without being half Greek as she was he knew what she meant. She put her glass down and walked over to where he was seated. He rose to meet her. In silence she pressed herself against him and let her arms encircle his body. He held her close. Then she lifted her face up to his and let him kiss her. He kissed her mouth, her closed eyes and the softness of her neck. He didn't give more than a passing thought to the untoward passivity she displayed. All he could think of was the wild outside chance that had brought him together with this woman in his arms, and the good fortune that had caused her to decide to belong to him.

As he removed her clothing and made love to her, Eleni's mind was a cloud of conflicting emotions. Could he guess,

she wondered, how difficult this was for her. Difficult because while half of her wanted to submit entirely to him, another half wouldn't allow her to forget the fact that this was part of the assignment she'd been given by Maria Fowler. Maria knew that it might come to this, but what she didn't know was that Eleni would welcome it as she did.

In the darkness of her bedroom her doubts began to cumber, and as she felt the weight of his body on hers, they disappeared completely.

It was midnight when Coco Phillips received the telephone call that caused her to leave the hotel. She handed in her key and told the night clerk that she'd be back late. The clerk placed her key in her box and watched appreciatively as she walked across the lobby to the door, hips swinging provocatively. He liked the freedom with which American women behaved. That sort of behaviour was not possible in a well-brought-up Greek girl. With a feeling of distaste mixed with an equal part of envy for whoever the lucky man might be, he pictured her staying out all night and not returning until after dawn. But he was wrong. Coco Phillips didn't return at all.

6 JIGSAW

NEXT MORNING brought the promise of another beautiful day. Burns had slept late having come back to his room at almost daylight. He'd promised Eleni an excursion to the islands, but now as he sipped his coffee he wondered if it were a good idea. It would mean a few days out of Athens, and what would happen if a message from Stavros came while he was gone. Now that he'd finally got things moving, he hated the idea of not taking advantage of the fact. But thoughts of Eleni returned to tempt him. And the more he thought of her the less

important his mission seemed to him. After all, he'd already delivered his warning, what more could he do? And a few days away would be just what he needed to settle the doubt in his mind about the question that wanted answering. He'd almost reached his decision when a knock sounded on his door snapping him out of his reverie.

The waiter who entered was a new one, Burns had never seen him before. He smiled reassuringly as he informed *Kyrios* Burns that the fresh coffee he'd ordered had arrived. Burns was about to protest that there must be some mistake as he hadn't ordered a refill, but something in the young man's eyes silenced him. Instead he thanked him, slipped a coin in his hand, and waited until he left the room before walking over to the tray. The note was under the cup. It read 'Zonar's at ten. Kilalis's daughter has disappeared. Don't ask questions in the meantime.' It was signed M.

He burned the slip of paper in the ashtray. The admonition not to ask questions didn't mean that he couldn't think them, and he thought many. If Coco had disappeared, how did Mino know about it? And did she disappear of her own will or against it? And where did she fit in to all this? Was she too searching for Stavros? More complications, he thought grimly as he hoped she wasn't in any serious trouble. He thought of whatever it was she had with her that someone else wanted badly enough to have gone through her room as he did. And he berated himself for not doing something more concrete to help her instead of leaving her as he did the other night. He didn't like this turn of events.

It was already past nine-thirty, so he dressed hurriedly, and scribbled a note to Eleni telling her the trip to the islands was off and that he'd explain later.

Burns sat at one of the tables at the far end of Zonar's and waited for contact to be made. He felt keyed up. While nothing about Athens in 1973 could be compared to what it was when he was here last, he felt an undercurrent flowing beneath this busy exterior that chilled him. From the events of the past

few days, he thought wryly, nothing really had changed. Looking up, he noticed a tall statuesque girl standing amid the tables, her eyes sweeping the patrons. The classic Greek beauty, he thought, the sort of face one can see on the ancient statues. However incongruous, the full skirt and tight, brightly coloured sweater didn't clash with the classic look. It was one of the things he loved about Greece, this combination of now and then that harmonized so well. Their eyes met, and she slowly made her way in his direction.

As she came close she began to smile. He got to his feet and held out his hand. 'I'm sorry I'm late, Richard,' she said. Her voice was pleasantly husky, and her English slightly accented. 'I missed my bus and decided to walk.'

He held the chair for her as she sat down, and he signalled for two coffees. He sat opposite and told her that she was forgiven. The girl asked him if he'd mind if she spoke in Greek as she felt more comfortable that way. When he assented, she switched to the northern dialect. 'Do you still remember it?' she asked teasingly.

'Yes, but go slowly. It's been a long time.'

She introduced herself as the daughter of Christos Lersis, and said it would be safer if they spoke in the dialect in order to lessen the chance of being overheard. Burns's memory leaped backward in time at the mention of that name. Back to the hills of Epirus, and the tension gripped him again.

They sat together over their cups of coffee and looked for all the world like two people absorbed only in themselves. 'My name's Thalia,' she told him. 'I've been sent to inform you of what happened to Fanni Kilalis. You know her as Coco Phillips.'

'Who sent you?' Burns wanted to make sure.

'Mino,' she whispered. 'When we found out she was here and that others were interested in her presence, a man was assigned to follow her.'

'When did he start his assignment?'

'Yesterday. Why?'

'Because someone else was following her the night before,' he told her flatly. She didn't seem surprised at this information, then went on to tell him that last night at a few minutes past midnight she'd left the hotel and got into a waiting taxi that already had a passenger in it. Their man lost the taxi in traffic so came back to the hotel to wait.

'He's still waiting,' she concluded. 'The girl hasn't come back.'

'What has this got to do with me?' Burns inquired.

'Because she's involved.'

'In what way?'

'We're still not sure, but we think it could be the gold.'

Burns was suddenly reminded of Nikos. He'd said the same thing when they'd met. It added up. Whoever had her followed, whoever searched her room, and whoever was holding her now, were most likely interested in her since she knew its hiding place. The girl was in a spot. 'Any idea where she is?' he asked.

'Not yet,' Thalia answered. 'We need time. You can help by keeping the police out of it.' She opened her purse and handed him a sealed envelope. 'Show this to the hotel manager,' she instructed. 'It's a note signed by her telling you that she left Athens for a few days and will see you when she returns. That should keep them from calling in the police.'

Burns slipped the envelope into his inside pocket. 'I hope you know what you're doing,' he said.

'We do,' Thalia replied with a confidence she didn't feel. 'Oh, yes,' she added, 'Mino told me to tell you that like it or not you're back with us.'

How true, Burns thought. Like it or not. He frowned.

'Shall I tell him you frowned?' She was smiling at him.

'That won't be necessary. He'd probably guess anyway.' As he pushed his chair back he caught sight of Caldwell approaching the group of tables. His multi-coloured sport shirt stood out like a beacon. He spotted Burns and waved a pudgy hand. Thalia noticed her companion's stricken look.

'What's the matter?' she asked

'I want to avoid that man,' he whispered 'He's a bore who keeps popping up every time I turn around'

'Walk me to the bus' She stood up and waited as Burns left some money on the table Then she linked her arm through his and they wound their way through the tables in the opposite direction But Caldwell came after them

'Hi, there,' he called out Before they could get away he was up to them 'Haven't seen you around lately,' he greeted Burns 'Where you been?'

'Sightseeing,' Burns replied coolly, studiously avoiding any introductions But Caldwell was staring at Thalia unashamedly

'Some sights, if you don't mind my saying so' The other two did not respond to his booming laugh As Burns tugged gently at her arm Thalia lost her balance, twisted on her ankle and fell against Caldwell He grabbed her to keep her from falling to the ground

'Damn,' she muttered in English as she straightened up 'These high heels always turn under me I'm just not used to anything but sandals' She apologized to Caldwell, then turned to Burns I guess I'd better forget about a bus Would you get me a taxi, Richard?'

Favouring the ankle, she held tightly to his arm while Burns, after nodding shortly to Caldwell, walked with her to where they might get a taxi

'Neat trick,' he whispered when they were out of earshot

'Yes, wasn't it?' Then just before getting into the taxi she looked up at him, her eyes were serious 'He's carrying a gun, Richard,' she said, and left him standing there

He watched the taxi as it joined the slowly moving mass of cars, then turned back to where he'd last seen Caldwell He was nowhere in sight

Caldwell was nowhere in sight because at that precise moment he was stepping into a telephone booth He dialled a number then spoke in a guarded tone when his connection

was made 'The girl has been gone all night,' he said without preliminary 'I don't like the looks of it Have your people check into it I'm sure Burns knows something' He paused, then smiled 'And he has interesting friends This one found out I'm carrying a gun Never mind how'

The moment he walked out of the booth, the serious businesslike expression on his face changed back to the bland, open-faced mask he usually wore He removed his tourist guide book from his pocket, and strolled along the bustling Syn-tagma

It was a little past eleven when Burns got back to the Grande Bretagne, his mind more on Caldwell and his gun, than on Coco's disappearance When he casually told the manager of her trip and showed him the forged note, he was handed a surprise It seemed she had left a package in the hotel safe with instructions that it was to be delivered to him in the event she failed to return by midnight that day

'So if you stop by the desk tonight,' the manager said, 'the clerk has orders to give you the package That is,' he added with a smile, 'if she doesn't come back before then'

Burns replied that he hoped she would come back before midnight, and walked to the elevator Damn, he swore as he entered his room More complications He really hoped she'd return before the deadline and take him off the hook He had about enough on his mind as it was without this added to it He picked up the telephone and asked for Eleni's room, only to be informed that she'd gone out and left no message A long empty day stood before him He had a lot of thinking to do Caldwell Coco and her package her disappearance Mino and of course, Stavros And were they all tied in with each other A jigsaw puzzle if ever he'd seen one He decided to do his reflecting somewhere other than an hotel room After all, this was the first real breathing space he'd had since his arrival and he might as well take advantage of it He decided to take his problems to the Archaeological Museum and share

them with the bronze statue of Poseidon. Perhaps in front of something so eternally larger than life, he'd be able to sort out the questions that needed answering. And he had a lot to sort out.

7 THE CONSPIRATORS

ATOP A HILL overlooking a tiny harbour on the north-west coast of Crete stood an elegant villa surrounded by tall trees. Inside four men were seated at a long refectory table in the sun-drenched living-room deep in serious discussion. In their early or middle fifties, they didn't actually look alike, but they shared one characteristic which gave them a similarity immediately noticed. It was their military bearing despite the lack of uniform, and their clipped military manner of speaking. The discussion stopped abruptly as a servant distributed small cups of steaming coffee. The moment the man left the room, the speaker who had been interrupted by his entrance, picked up at the point he'd stopped.

He was a bulky man with a square face going soft, and small cruel eyes which darted quickly from one to the other of his listeners. 'As I was saying,' he began. 'The desire for power is not a thing of which we must be ashamed. It is precisely that desire and the drive to achieve it which has brought us together and binds us together. And the time has come for us to transform that desire into positive action.'

A crooked smile stretched his thin lips but in no way softened his expression. On the contrary, it somehow managed to heighten the hard cruelty of it. 'We are proud of our military heritage,' he went on. 'And proud of our steadfast loyalty to it. That pride and loyalty will be brought into full use when we become the rulers of our country. What we do in the coming weeks will decide our futures and the future of Greece. We must not fail. We will not.'

His words hung in the air and seemed to resound in the

heavy silence Only the buzzing of bees could be heard from outside The oldest of the group, a gaunt man whose face was discoloured with a myriad of liver spots, leaned forward in his chair 'I agree,' he said earnestly 'We've been behind the scenes too long We must not be afraid to step forward'

The first speaker, obviously the leader, ignored him as he cleared his throat 'The idea of Greece being dragged into an electoral adventure is something I personally find repellent. It is in essence a complete betrayal of the ideals for which we worked in '67'

The man seated directly opposite him tightened his grip on his coffee cup 'I told you then that Papadopoulos was not to be trusted'

'I don't recall you ever saying that,' the first man came back at him

'Neither do I,' the older man told him 'As a matter of fact, you were his strongest supporter'

'Gentlemen' Although softly uttered, the single word had the force to stop each of the three men in mid speech 'Let's not fight amongst ourselves,' the firm voice continued 'We've more important things to do here.'

The other three turned full attention upon the speaker, a heavy-set man wearing dark horn-rimmed glasses Something about his manner made the others wordlessly defer to him 'You're right, General,' he said as he directed his eyeless glance to the first speaker 'The idea of an election is indeed repulsive So-called parliamentary rule is a mask a trap a refuge and an empty reform'

'There are Greeks who don't exactly agree with that theory,' the youngest of the group ventured

The mouth beneath the dark glasses tightened, then relaxed into a smile that could denote secret pleasure 'Any Greek who opposes that view,' he proclaimed slowly, 'will be swept aside without any hesitation You can be sure of that'

The first speaker lifted a cut glass decanter from the table and filled four glasses with a clear rich brandy

'Let's drink to that,' he toasted 'And to our imminent success'

He and two others of the group lifted a glass to the toast, but the man with the dark glasses left his standing alone on the silver tray, a silent tribute to his abstemiousness. He had no use for drink, nor for the other small pleasures of life, finding them to be corrupting to the important things. Power, and control over the fate of other men, was what he found stimulating. He watched as his three companions downed the fiery liquid, his features remaining stolidly impassive, his eyes hidden behind their protective dark glasses. He prided himself in not needing this artificial intoxication, the knowledge that he was the power behind the power was sufficient to achieve a similar condition.

As though reading his thoughts, the first man turned inquiring eyes to him. 'Exactly how many men do you have now?' he asked.

'I started with two thousand,' he replied and a tiny smile played across his mouth, 'I now have twenty thousand.'

'More than enough,' said the older man approvingly.

'Anything new on Alexandratos?' the first man asked. 'While he's not enough to stop us, I don't like the idea that he can elude us so successfully. Something must be done.'

'I agree.' This from the youngest of the generals, and all three looked expectantly at their colleague with the dark glasses. He took his time in replying.

'My man returned from the U S with no new leads,' he said evenly. 'However he expects to come up with something more concrete very soon. Of one thing you can be certain, gentlemen.' His voice hardened. 'I want Stavros Alexandratos dead as much as you do. And I want to display his corpse for all to see, thereby putting an end to the potential power he carries within him.'

'It's my opinion,' said the older man softly, 'that too much importance is put on this one man. Whatever power he may carry within him, as you put it, we certainly carry more.'

'True But he's still dangerous Fidel Castro was one man too Men like him and Alexandratos are as fuses to a bomb Inactivate the fuse and you inactivate the bomb Allowing him to remain alive and continue his work could lead to a Resistance group strong enough one day to cause civil war I intend to eliminate all such possibilities, vague as they may seem now'

No one among the listeners disagreed with him They rarely did They appreciated his abilities and while he was not their actual leader, he was their planner and the one who wrote the words their leader spoke And so they nodded their silent approval, filled their glasses again with brandy, and settled back in their chairs confident and relaxed Their day, they strongly felt, would soon be at hand

In the room adjoining the living-room, the servant who had brought the generals their coffee was at that moment removing a tiny apparatus he'd previously attached to the leg of a chair that was drawn flat up against the connecting wall From the apparatus he withdrew a minute cylinder which he then placed inside the hollow top of a mechanical pencil He placed both the pencil and the apparatus in his pocket and left the room He glanced at his wristwatch He wouldn't be needed until lunchtime More than enough time to get the pencil on its way to Mino in Athens

8 THE TRAP

LIFE PLAYS its little jokes indiscriminately, Burns thought as he held two of them in his hands One was the small package from Coco Phillips that the manager had just given him, and the other was another note from the girl herself The package contained an elaborately drawn map of a terrain familiar to Burns The area of the Epirus hills where he'd hidden

out with the Partisans A large X marked the spot where the gold dropped by the British was buried A message was scrawled on the bottom of the paper

'You're smart,' it read 'They *were* searching my room, and this is what they were looking for I'm following your advice and putting this in the hotel safe If anything happens to me, you'll get it There's no one else I can trust, and since you obviously knew my parents, I trust you I hope you won't ever be reading this, because if you do it means I'm in trouble In that case I'm passing the trouble on to you OK? Do whatever you think is best with the gold Maybe it's better this way Fanni '

A cry for help was the other joke It came in the form of a more recent message from the same unfortunate young lady with a lot that could be read between the lines From the handwriting as compared with the previous notes Burns had received, it was obviously written under stress It was also more formal than the others

'Dear Mr Burns—The man who brings this can be trusted Take the package I left for you and give it to him I'll explain when I see you Coco '

Written on the envelope that contained her note was another message printed in Greek in laboriously executed block letters It informed Burns that the bearer had been to see him earlier and would return at 1 a m He'd be waiting in front of the hotel with a car

Burns unhesitatingly made up his mind First he committed the map to memory, then he burned it Next he carefully rewrapped the package and put it in his inside pocket Whoever it was that was expecting the package was going to get him too That same unknown person must be insane to think he'd fall for such an obvious trick Now that he knew what it was that Spyros Kilalis's daughter was in Greece to get, he knew he was involved whether he liked it or not He frowned

There was that phrase again. He glanced at his watch. Twelve-thirty. Less than half an hour since he'd come back from having dinner with Eleni. He decided to go to her room and tell her about the message and what to do should he fail to return. The thought occurred to him that he was no doubt walking into the same trap into which Coco had walked the previous night, but he knew he had to chance it. He'd feel better if he had a gun.

'I'll go with you,' Eleni's voice was firm as she said it the moment he finished telling her what had happened and what he was going to do. It took a bit of convincing before Burns got her to agree that she'd be more use to him here if he were to get into trouble. He told her how to get in contact with Mino in that eventuality, and to stay away from the police. Then as he stood up to go, she walked to the closet and fumbled inside a leather make-up case.

'Take this with you,' she said as she handed him a small automatic. 'It's loaded.'

'You're the answer to a knight errant's prayer,' he said as he kissed her. It wasn't until he was on his way down to the lobby that the question of what she was doing with a gun entered his mind.

A large bearlike man with a thick moustache, a weather-lined face and a mass of unruly hair was standing in front of the hotel obviously waiting for someone. Dressed in a heavy sheepskin vest, his legs encased in thick boots, he cut such an anachronistic figure in the centre of Athens at one in the morning, that Burns was certain he was his man. He walked up to him.

'You waiting for me?' he asked.

'Kyrios Burns?' The man's voice was hoarse and seemed unaccustomed to speaking more than one word at a time.

'That's right,' Burns replied, imitating the man's manner. They stood facing each other for a moment as though measuring one another's capabilities like a pair of wrestlers. The shepherd held out his hand.

'The package,' he said

'I'll deliver it myself,' Burns told him This was something the shepherd was not ready for He hesitated, thought it over, then shook his massive head slowly from side to side

'No'

'Then no package' Burns turned to go back into the hotel when he was stopped by the man's hand grabbing his arm

'It's a long drive,' he said

'I'm a patient man'

The shepherd motioned him to follow, and led him to where his car was parked It was an old Pontiac, dust-covered and battered Burns made sure there was no one in the back seat before he got in beside the shepherd They drove out of the city heading north

With the natural reticence of mountain people, the shepherd offered little in the way of explanation All he would say in response to Burns's prompting was that he had a hut up in the Parnassos where the girl was waiting for them She'd had an accident and asked him to drive down to Athens and get the package for her When Burns asked why she hadn't come down herself, the man merely shrugged It was so obviously a fabrication, that more than ever Burns was glad he'd made the decision to see for himself There was little doubt in his mind that the whole thing would prove to be tied in somehow with Stavros and the others He let his right hand rest reassuringly on the automatic in his pocket

The Parnassos is a vast stretch of over two hundred square miles surrounded by a wall of high mountains A huge mass of rock that sloped into ravines, meadows, gorges, caves and precipices And somewhere in that vastness Coco Phillips was being held prisoner Well, he thought grimly, someone was due for a surprise when he'd show up

In silence the car sped through the moonless night, slowing down only when the curve of the narrow road made it necessary In between trying to identify the landscape should he need it, he dozed fitfully The muteness of the shepherd as

he hunched tightfisted over the wheel was ominous. Then gradually the black anonymous night gave way to the faint streaks of dawn and their surroundings became identifiable. Haze-tipped mountains, tiny clusters of villages and isolated huts came into view. Then nothing but the jagged hills with their stubbled shadows and the grim precipices that dropped frighteningly around them. Far below the valley was shrouded from view. Apprehension began to weigh heavily on Burns. He knew what to expect up here. The Parnassos had a wild and violent history starting with pagan rites and ending with present-day banditry. He reflected at this sudden streak of foolhardiness that had cropped up in him of late, beginning with his headlong flight from New York to this wild ride through the Parnassos. He gritted his teeth and wondered what windmill was waiting for this over-aged Don Quixote.

The car was slowing down now, taking the ruts more carefully. They stopped at the edge of a meadow, and the shepherd opened his door.

'Here,' he said, and got out.

Burns followed suit.

Ragged-edged mountains rimmed the meadow, and not a sign of life was evident as far as the eye could see. With a lumbering stride the shepherd started across the meadow, Burns a few steps behind him, his hand still on his gun. They walked this way towards a cluster of huge boulders that protruded from the flatness like a growth. It wasn't until they were almost upon it, that Burns made out the hut nestled under its protection. It was a rough, makeshift sort of building, typical of the huts used by shepherds during the long months they're out with their sheep.

'Here,' the monosyllabic shepherd said again. 'The girl is inside.' He gestured for him to go in, but Burns held back. With a shrug, the shepherd opened the door with one hand while the other suddenly shot out and grabbed Burns by the shoulder, shoving him into the hut. When he himself entered he looked into the muzzle of the automatic. His dull eyes

flickered momentarily, and his lips twitched. They stood facing each other in the middle of the empty hut

'All right, you son-of-a-bitch,' Burns said slowly 'You can start telling the truth now'

Eyes narrowed with anger, the shepherd became what was for him, loquacious 'She was here I swear it She must have wandered off somewhere' His arm gestured vaguely

You can do better than that' Burns's eyes were hard as he spoke His nerves were tingling and he had an overpowering desire to get out of this place He started edging towards the door

'She was here,' the shepherd insisted He pointed over to a corner 'There's where she slept You can see she left her suitcase there'

The moment he turned to look, Burns knew he shouldn't have But it was too late The shepherd's heavy body struck him with tremendous force, knocking him to the earthen floor The gun went flying Arms entwined about each other, they struggled to reach it Too close to get off a blow, Burns dived up his knees and thrust his opponent backwards with his feet

Before the shepherd could regain his balance, Burns was on him He picked him off the floor by his sheepskin vest and held him against the wall Then he hit him repeatedly in the face until his head was snapping back and forth limply like a puppet's But the man was tough As Burns released him in order to go for the gun, he was butted under the chin by a head as hard as one of the boulders outside He went down, but as he did so he reached out and grabbed at the sheepskin vest The shepherd went down with him

As they rolled about on the floor the shepherd reached into one of his boots, and Burns saw the gleam of a knife just in time to get out of the way as the man's arm came down He grabbed hold of the arm and twisted it backwards until he heard the snap The shepherd let out a cry and the knife clattered to the floor Burns got to his feet and walked over

to where the gun was lying. He picked it up and then went for the knife. He held it under the shepherd's chin.

'One more chance,' he panted. 'Start talking or I'll cut your throat with your own knife.'

Hugging his broken arm close to his body, the shepherd told Burns that he'd never seen the girl at all. That he was hired by a man to deliver the note to the hotel and pick up the package. His orders were to deliver the package at which time he'd be paid.

'Where?' Burns demanded. The shepherd hesitated, his loyalty to his employer plus the desire for payment strong within him. Burns backed away and raised his automatic.

'If you think I'm joking, you're mistaken,' he said coldly. 'I'd just as soon kill you as not. I'd be doing the peasants around here a favour if I did. You have thirty seconds to make up your mind.' He started counting. The man sighed.

'Just off the road to Lavidia. There's a taverna called Nea Ellas. He's waiting for me.'

'Mind if I use your car?' Burns asked as he walked to the door. Without waiting for a reply he left the hut, got into the Pontiac and drove away. In the rearview mirror he saw the shepherd start plodding after him, still clutching his broken arm. He was almost sorry for the man when he thought of the long walk he had in front of him.

9 SURPRISE

LOOKING THROUGH the screen of faded beads, Burns could see that the Nea Ellas was empty except for the proprietor and one patron sitting at a rear table with his back to the entrance. Silently, Burns parted the strands and stepped inside. Only the proprietor looked up. He said nothing. Looked from Burns to the patron sipping coffee, then stepped into the kitchen. Burns walked up to the coffee sipper and tossed

Coco's re-wrapped package over the man's head. It landed flat on the table, the sound reverberating like a shot. The man picked it up, scanned the writing on it, then turned around. The smile froze on his face momentarily before fading. Burns's expression also hardened as he looked into the face of Nikos Frangidakis. It would've been hard to tell which of the two men was more surprised.

Burns was the first to find his voice. 'I should've known,' he said through clenched teeth. 'A man like you doesn't remain uninvolved, does he?'

Nikos turned his attention to the package. With strong fingers he broke the string and tore at the wrapping. His face flushed with fury as he saw that there was nothing inside. He swung back towards Burns. 'Where is it?' he snarled.

'I burned it.'

Nikos was on his feet before he noticed the gun in Burns's hand. He stood there, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides in helpless frustration.

'Start talking,' Burns said quietly.

'It was the gold,' Nikos began. 'It's just as much mine as yours. More even. What right do you or that girl have to take it away from me? Or even Stavros for that matter? He'd only waste it playing his same old game.' His manner changed suddenly, becoming confidential. 'Why don't we go into this together, Richard? There's enough for both of us.'

'What makes you think I'm interested in the gold?'

Nikos's eyes gleamed shrewdly. 'Why else are you here? You didn't fool me with your story about Stavros. And you're wasting your time with that woman. She only wants to use you to help her get the stuff. I wouldn't trust her if I were you.'

Burns was confused. 'Trust who? What are you babbling about?'

Nikos grinned. 'Don't try to fool me, old friend. I'm not that naive. I know what you two are up to.'

Burns grabbed him by the collar. 'What the hell do you mean by that remark, old friend?'

Nikos shook himself free 'I mean you and Eleni Alexandratos I know you're both after the gold'

Burns felt as though the roof had caved in on him His throat was tight and dry, and it was an effort for him to get the word out 'Who?' he asked

'Eleni Alexandratos Stavros's wife That's why I had to use such measures on the Kilaris girl I had to work fast before you two got there before me' He leaned close 'But it's not too late, Richard We can beat them all to it And we can make much better use of the gold, can't we?' He chuckled 'No buying of guns for us, right?'

Burns was trembling as Nikos's rush of words enveloped him Eleni Stavros's wife Of course The puzzle was falling into place What a fool he'd been What was she up to? Was she working for or against her husband? He felt battered He tried to focus on the grinning face of Nikos 'What did you do with the girl?' he asked, trying to cover up his confusion about Eleni

Nikos sobered suddenly 'She's dead I didn't want to kill her It was just that she tried to escape and I hit her I guess I swung harder than I meant to'

Just as Burns was about to pull the trigger, he was hit from behind The bullet went wild

He had a splitting headache when he awoke, and when he rubbed the back of his head he felt the crusted blood He grimaced ruefully He should've paid more attention to the proprietor That same gentleman entered from the kitchen with a wet cloth, and solicitously began to bathe Burns's wound He apologized profusely about what he'd done, but he couldn't allow a murder to be committed in his tavern Burns accepted the apology and asked the man to arrange for a taxi to drive him back to Athens While he waited he tried to put things in order Eleni Harper was Stavros's wife This was uppermost in his mind And what was she up to? The more he thought about it, the more it added up to the fact that she must

be working against her husband, and out to get the gold for herself. Otherwise why should she keep her identity from him as she did? He felt like kicking himself for being such a fool. To be taken in as he was by a beautiful woman. And at his age. He'd flopped miserably all round. Nikos had got away, poor Coco Phillips was dead and he'd been too late to help her, and he was no closer to Stavros than he'd ever been. The only thing he'd accomplished was learning Eleni's true identity, and that was something that didn't give him much pleasure.

He washed his face in the kitchen and was on his second cup of coffee when the taxi from Lavidia arrived. He slept restlessly all the way back to Athens.

'Your car was delivered a half hour ago, *Kyria Burns*,' the desk clerk informed him when he asked for his key.

'What car?'

The clerk shrugged that Mediterranean shrug as he gave Burns the information that a tall dark man asked that *Kyria Burns* be told that his car had been left at the garage on Othonos Street. That, and three calls from *Kyria Harper* asking for him.

Burns didn't like this new development, and decided to look into it without delay. He left word to tell Eleni that he'd get in touch with her later, and walked back into the street. The bath and change of clothing could wait, he thought. That and his meeting with Eleni. A meeting he didn't at all look forward to.

The garage attendant confirmed the story the desk clerk had given him. He pointed out the car that had been left in his name. It was the old Pontiac. The attendant handed over the keys, and Burns walked down the long row of parked cars until he came to the one left for him. He stared at it trying to figure out what it was all about. His first thought was the possibility of a bomb. Methodically he went over the car. Under the floor board, under the hood, the ignition and the

starter connections, the clutch and the brake pedal. Disregarding the greasy pavement, he got on his back and checked underneath. Nothing anywhere. He got to his feet and stood looking at the car thoughtfully, the keys dangling from his hand.

A sudden thought struck him. He glanced around quickly. There was no one in sight. The attendant was in his small glass-enclosed office with his back turned. Burns went around to the back of the car, fitted the key into the trunk and turned it. His heart thumped wildly as he did so, and for a fleeting moment he almost changed his mind. Slowly, he raised the lid high until it locked into position. Coco Phillips lay twisted inside the trunk, jammed in amid the things usually found there, her hair spread about her face like a blonde shroud.

Automatically he reached for the cold lifeless hand, held it for a second as though saying good-bye, then put it down. His face was empty of expression as he closed the trunk lid and locked it. His mind was racing. He could see the fine hand of Nikos behind this. What a neat way to get rid of the body and at the same time eliminate another rival for the gold. An anonymous phone call to the police would do the trick, and Burns would be left with a lot of explaining to do. Neat was the word for it. He'd have to work fast to get out of this one.

He got behind the wheel, started the engine and manoeuvred his way to the exit. As he was telling the attendant that he'd return later in the day, Eleni turned into the driveway and stopped when she saw him. Without a word, she opened the door and sat down beside him. He stared at her with mixed emotions.

'I've been worried about you, Richard,' she said as she kissed him on the cheek. 'I was about to send out the call for help. Where've you been?'

He couldn't bring himself to reply. All he could think of was that this was Stavros's wife he was sitting with. Stavros's wife with whom he was in love. For a moment it drove the

more immediate problem from his thoughts. He turned to look at her. 'Goddamn it, he swore to himself, why does she have to be so beautiful?

'What happened?' she was asking him

'Lots,' was all he could manage

'Where'd you get this car?'

'It's a present.'

She felt a sudden cold chill go through her body. 'There's something wrong, darling,' she said. 'I can feel it.'

'How right you are.'

'Can I help?' she asked

'Yes, you can. Where's a good place to get rid of a body?'

Part Three

'We must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures'

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
Julius Caesar

1. THE RECKONING

IT WAS REFLEX more than anything else that made him turn to her for help. That and the sad fact that he had no one else to turn to. He was out of touch with Mino and besides didn't want to involve him in this. He felt a perverse pleasure in getting Eleni mixed up in what could be a messy situation. A sort of payment for what she'd done to him, he thought with little satisfaction.

As they drove through the crowded streets, he explained the entire night's happening right up to his meeting with Nikos. She was silent during the whole thing. When he had finished, all she said was that she knew just the place to leave Coco's body. 'Drive over the canal to Corinth,' she said. 'I'll direct you when we get there.'

A tense and heavy silence rode with them during the almost two-hour drive. Eleni, with her head leaning against the back of the seat, was thinking mainly about Coco and the complications that had arisen. Burns was thinking mainly about Eleni. He took his tension out on the wheel, gripping it tightly as he drove. Exhaustion, both physical and emotional, was beginning to drain him as his thoughts leaped about. One thing at a time, he cautioned himself. First Coco. Then he'd face the problem of Eleni.

Once on the open road, the landscape streamed past quickly and soon the canal came into sight. They sped across the long

bridge gleaming like silver over the calm water Eleni broke the silence 'Beyond the old city of Corinth we'll come to the Patras road Go west on it until I tell you to turn off There's no beach road, but any turn off after Asos will take us to the sea' She leaned back and closed her eyes

She kept them closed until she felt the car come to a stop, and when she opened them the shimmering sea and deserted sand were all she saw.

'You'd better stay here,' Burns said curtly as he got out 'It's not going to be pleasant'

She closed her eyes again, thankful that it was he who had suggested it She remained in that position for the endless time it took him to accomplish the distasteful job Then he was back The engine started up, they backed up on to the road, then with tyres screeching they headed in the direction from which they'd come The silence was still with them

It wasn't until they had crossed the canal and were on the new road to Athens, that Burns felt strong enough to say it 'Now for problem number two' His tone was strangely harsh

Something in his manner prepared her for what was coming 'And what's that?' she asked, bracing herself

He kept his eyes on the road 'I know who you are,' he said 'Oh.'

'Why did you lie to me?' he asked

'I never lied to you,' she said evenly She was calmer, more in control now that it was out in the open He was waiting for an explanation, and she knew she'd have to give him one Remember who you are, she told herself Remember the job you have to do The job that takes precedence over everything else Even being in love She sat up straight and turned her face towards Burns

Slowly, with words carefully chosen, she began to explain to him She deliberately forced her voice to be flat and reasonable, keeping all pleading out of it as she defended her actions Everything she'd told him before was the truth Her name was Harper She'd gone back to it after Stavros had died.

Where were the lies, she asked. Hadn't she suggested more than once that his search was futile?

'You still want me to believe that?' Burns asked sharply.

'Yes.'

'Then you should have told me who you were at the beginning,' Burns snapped. 'Now it's too late. I can't help looking for ulterior motives.'

'Such as?'

'I'm not sure. Maybe it's the gold.'

'You don't really think that, do you?'

'Well, if it's not that, you must be working against him.'

'That should be even harder to believe,' she said softly.

'Then why don't you take me to him?'

She sighed. 'Because he's dead.'

He turned his head sharply to look at her, but she was staring out of the side window as she'd spoken. He would have preferred looking her in the eye as she said those words.

'I don't believe you,' he said.

'I'm sorry you don't.'

She said nothing more for the rest of the drive back to Athens. Once or twice she tried but stopped, knowing there wasn't anything she could say that would convince him. Not now anyway. All she really knew was that she was in love with him. But that wasn't enough. She had to trust him. She never allowed herself to forget that it was at Maria Fowler's that she'd seen his photograph and been told of the visit paid to him by MacDonald. It was right after that visit that he'd left for Greece. She too was right in harbouring conflicting thoughts. Yet it was difficult, she had to admit, to make her suspicions stick. It was not easy for her to face the possibility that he was an agent working hand in hand with those who wanted to neutralize Stavros and the position he held with the Greek people. Yet there had been such Judases in the past. People who switched loyalties as easily as they changed lovers. An overwhelming sadness lay heavily upon her as she came to the decision that she couldn't trust him enough to

tell him the truth. The whole truth Her work was too important to take the risk She wished desperately that she could talk with Maria Fowler

It was late afternoon when the car pulled up in front of the garage 'Here's where you get out,' Burns told her as he leaned over and opened the door

Without a word she did so Her legs felt weak as she stood on the pavement and watched the car disappear into the darkness of the garage She walked slowly back to the hotel, cursing the bad luck that made her fall in love with this man

Two men were waiting for him as he parked the car One quick glimpse was all Burns needed to recognize them for what they were Plainclothes policemen He steeled himself to play it cool

2 A MESSAGE FROM MRS FOWLER

AFTER A PROTRACTED SCENE with the pair of detectives during which he'd improvised his alibi as he went, Burns returned to his room at the point of collapse The preceding eighteen hours had been too much of a strain, and he had to fight to keep a firm grip on his nerves while being interrogated He maintained a wide-eyed innocence at the mention of a corpse, and watched with interest while they searched the car trunk for any indication of one He silently thanked the good luck that Nickos's blow which killed Coco hadn't caused any bleeding To the policemen he concocted a wild explanation of how some friends must have left him this old car as a joke, and expressed surprise that they should think there was something sinister about it When he felt that they may not be swallowing his story, he testily suggested that they contact George MacDonald in Washington in care of the CIA As they took down that information he knew that they had every intention of doing just that Stretched out fully

clothed on his bed, he hoped that MacDonald would come through and keep the police off his back. He fell asleep.

The ringing of the telephone jarred him awake. 'How about having dinner with me?' Eleni's voice came over the wire.

Burns sighed. He wasn't quite up to coping with this yet. It was too soon. The wound would have to heal a bit before he could face her. He declined, trying to keep any curtness from his tone.

'I'll be at Aleco's if you change your mind,' she told him and rang off. He lay back and for a moment considered taking her up on her invitation just to see what would develop, but drifted back into his interrupted sleep while still debating the wisdom of it.

Eleni too had returned to her room in a state of near exhaustion. She felt, as she told herself, like an artichoke that was being peeled apart leaf by leaf. Her outer-protection was being removed and the soft centre was about to be exposed. She had to fight to retain her strength of purpose.

And Burns wasn't making it any easier for her. She'd hoped he would've accepted her gesture to have dinner together so that she might make some attempt at repairing the damage. His refusal hurt deeply. She felt restless. The room seemed to press in around her. She picked up the telephone and asked for a number. The waiter at Aleco's answered. In carefully chosen words she requested a single reservation, making a point of asking for table five and saying she'd arrive at ten-twenty-five. The time and table number being the signal to alert Mino. She had a lot to tell him and looked forward to sharing her problems.

The telephone rang.

'Mrs Harper?' It was an unfamiliar voice.

'Yes?'

'I'm a friend of Maria Fowler's. I just got in from Washington. Can I see you? I have an important message from her.'

'Of course,' Eleni replied unhesitatingly. 'When?'

'Now I'm at the City Palace Hotel nearby We can meet in the bar It's preferable to your hotel'

'I'll be there in ten minutes How will I know you?'

'I'll know you,' the man replied and hung up

Eleni put on a pair of shoes, threw a light sweater around her shoulders and left the room The strange voice troubled her Why didn't she recognize it? True, there were many parts of their organization that she didn't know, yet . She put the doubt from her mind She hoped the message he brought didn't mean a change of plan that would cause her to leave Greece She didn't like the idea of leaving Burns just now with things as they were She hurried across the lobby

Charles Caldwell was strolling out of the bar in time to see her dash past This woman bothered him, and his full lips pursed in speculative thought He hadn't seen her all day, and the first sight he'd had of Burns was a few hours before heading up to his room looking beat and bedraggled Like he'd been in a fight Had they been together, he wondered What the hell were the two of them up to, and where was she off to now alone? He decided to find out Keeping a respectable distance behind her, he watched as she threaded her way through the press of pedestrians towards Stadiou Street

Eleni hurried anxiously She didn't want to lose time with this meeting and miss Mino at Aleco's As she started to cross the wide street, she caught sight of a man on the other side waving at her and calling her name Maria must have shown him my photo, she thought, as she approached him He took her hand and brushed his lips across it continental style

'You're much more attractive than Maria's photograph of you,' he said, corroborating her thought He was a tall, thin man with incongruously thick features and pale skin He was well dressed and scrupulously polite He didn't let go of her hand as they headed towards the hotel Caldwell watched from across the street

'What is the message?' Eleni asked as they walked

'This,' the man replied, smiling At that moment his hand

slipped upwards until his strong fingers tightened about her wrist. She felt a sharp sting as he pressed the point of a hypodermic needle into her forearm with his other hand.

Eleni gasped more in shock than in pain. Then her eyes widened in sudden fear as she realized what had happened. The needle was withdrawn but her arm was still firmly held. She stared into the smiling face beside her. It began to blur. Then she twisted her head towards the people passing so close. They too were a blur. Help me, someone. Help me, she cried. But the cry never left her brain. She slumped against the man and his arms went around her for support.

To anyone curious enough to notice, they looked for all the world like a pair of lovers in an embrace. But to Caldwell it looked different. He started towards them. As he crossed the street he saw a car stop at the kerb, its rear door swing open and Eleni thrust hastily into the back seat. The man got in after her as the car lurched forward into traffic. Caldwell broke into a run. The car had to swerve to avoid hitting him, and as it did so he got a good look at the face of the driver. He'd seen that face before. In a file in Washington, D.C. And the name that went along with it was Samos Kostandis.

3 THE WALRUS AND THE CARPENTER

IT WAS AFTER MIDNIGHT when the soft, insistent tapping on his door woke him. Burns stared at his watch and swore. Why in hell don't they let me sleep, he muttered half aloud. The knocking continued. 'All right, all right,' he called out. 'I'm coming.'

He moved across the floor in his stockinged feet, then stopped as a thought struck him. He reached into his jacket pocket which he'd flung across a chair when he'd come in, and removed the automatic Eleni had given him. He kept it in his hand as he opened the door. Charles Caldwell stood

there Burns frowned in annoyance 'What the hell do you want at this hour?' he demanded, not caring how unfriendly he sounded

'I must talk to you,' Caldwell replied Burns studied him as he stood framed in the doorway He looked different He was wearing a plain white shirt and a blue suit Even his complexion had lost its bright colour And there was something different as well about his eyes They were grimly serious Burns stepped aside

'All right,' he said 'Come on in'

Caldwell entered the room and closed the door behind him As he did so he noticed the gun in Burns's hand He smiled 'Always prepared, huh? It's a good idea'

'You ought to know,' Burns came back, recalling the fact that Caldwell packed one too 'Now tell me what's so important that you have to wake me up in the middle of the night'

'Can we sit down?' Caldwell asked 'Like in the poem, the time has come the walrus said to talk of many things'

Burns didn't appreciate the man's humour 'Am I one of the oysters?' he inquired sarcastically

'No,' Caldwell snapped 'Eleni Alexandratos is'

Burns stared at the man in surprise 'Who the hell are you?' he asked Caldwell sat down in one of the two chairs in the room and indicated for Burns to do the same He lit a cigarette

'I work with MacDonald,' he said curtly, and tossed his wallet on to the small coffee table that separated them Burns examined his identification, and tossed it back 'All right,' he said 'That's the who Now I want to know the why'

'I'll make it brief because we don't have much time Get your shoes on while I talk We have a plane to catch'

Burns shot him a quizzical look as he went into the bedroom for his shoes and a clean shirt Caldwell followed him and lounged in the doorway as he spoke

'Mac sent me here,' he explained 'And one of my jobs was

to make sure you didn't get into any trouble you couldn't get out of by yourself'

Burns concentrated on tucking his shirt into his trousers. 'Save your cute explanations for another time,' he said without looking up. 'MacDonald's not the sort of man to waste the department's men to play nursemaid. What's your other job?'

Caldwell chose not to answer the question, so Burns did it for him. 'You're here mainly to keep an eye on me in case I lead you to a certain party, isn't that it?'

An appreciative smile lit up Caldwell's face. 'I'm a lousy tail,' he admitted unabashedly. 'Always was.'

'Thanks for the tip. Now let's get back to Mrs Alexandratos.' He put on his jacket, slipped the automatic into the inside pocket, and walked past Caldwell into the sitting-room. 'And what's this about catching a plane?'

'Mrs A was snatched right off the street about three hours ago.'

Burns stared at him blankly. 'Snatched?'

'Colloquial American for kidnapped.'

Burns's stomach turned a somersault, and his hands clenched and unclenched themselves at his sides. He couldn't trust himself to speak.

Caldwell took him by the arm and steered him towards the door. 'Come on,' he said. 'I'll tell you about it. I've got a car waiting. It's about time we two began working together. I haven't been doing too well on my own.'

There was little conversation during the drive to the airport due to the presence of the driver, but once inside the privately chartered plane Caldwell began his explanations. Burns mainly listened, interrupting only when necessary. He wasn't too interested at this point in hearing Caldwell's roundabout reasons concerning his assignment. He was more interested in Eleni. Caldwell briefed him about what had happened on the street in front of the City Palace Hotel and what he'd done about it. After having recognized the driver of the car,

he went directly to Central Police Headquarters to see what they had on him. Then while they were running a check on him, he put in a call to MacDonald. It was what was in MacDonald's report on the man's background that gave him the idea where to look for Eleni.

Burns was silent for a while as he digested all the implications behind Caldwell's story. 'And where are we looking for her?' he asked at last.

'In Switzerland.'

'Why Switzerland of all places?'

'Just a hunch,' Caldwell replied. 'Ever hear of an organization called ODESSA?' he asked suddenly. Burns shook his head.

'Not many people have, unfortunately,' Caldwell told him. 'It was set up in 1947 and the initials stand for Organization der SS Angerhorigen. Translated it means Organization of SS members. On the face of it the initial committees set up were for charitable purposes. But beneath that outer covering lay an intricate network to facilitate the escape of top Nazis who had been kept busy jumping from one place to another in order to keep from being picked up. ODESSA arranged for new identity papers, passports, money and transportation. Jobs and cover were also supplied so that these big shots could live in proper comfort while planning the rise of the Fourth Reich.'

'What's all this got to do with Eleni?' Burns interrupted impatiently.

'If my hunch is right plenty,' Caldwell replied. He lit a cigarette and handed the pack to Burns. 'One of the covers they operated were private health clinics in the Alps that served as hideaways, drop points and way stations along the escape route through Italy to either Egypt or South America. One of those clinics was set up by a Dr Heinrich Murer, a plastic surgeon who did his internship at Auschwitz. He became quite proficient there. With his new name and passport, he did a bustling business in the small Alpine town of Davos.'

The Swiss couldn't touch him' He paused as he puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette 'God knows how many top echelon Nazis had their faces and fingerprints worked over by this artist For a while after the clinic was first put into operation, he had an associate working with him A Greek named Kostandis He was the driver of the car that picked up Eleni'

The silence this time was longer and heavier Burns didn't like the possibilities inherent in Caldwell's story If it all added up, then the people who wanted Stavros wanted him badly indeed 'It's not a bad hunch, Caldwell,' he said 'But what if you guessed wrong? What if she wasn't taken there?'

'But she was,' Caldwell replied confidently 'Once the idea hit me I checked with the airport A private plane had flown out at ten-thirty with an invalided woman aboard She was unconscious and on a stretcher The physician who accompanied her answered to Kostandis's description The plane was bound for Zurich I called the Zurich airport and was told that a private ambulance had been ordered to stand by Convinced?'

Burns smiled 'Convinced You sure work fast and efficient'

'I had to I don't like the idea of Mrs A in the hands of Dr Murer'

Burns didn't either He forced his mind not to dwell on the subject A thought struck him 'Why are you doing this?' he asked 'Aren't you a little off course?'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm supposed to be your target, you know'

'I like playing it safe,' Caldwell grinned 'Two targets are better than one And if I lost her, then I stand the chance of losing you too Then where'd I be? No targets And what good's a guy in my racket without a target'

Burns knew that his companion assumed this jocular tone in order to ease the tension, and he appreciated it But it didn't do any good He felt depressed and tired And scared There was no doubt in his mind that he was in love with

Eleni, and wanted her safe and unharmed. Thinking over the entire event that took place that evening, he felt like kicking himself for turning down her invitation for dinner. If he hadn't she wouldn't be in the spot she was in. He felt frustrated and desperate. Everything was going wrong, nothing made sense. Nothing in this upside-down world he'd blundered into. Even his love was senseless when he thought about it. His deep sigh was louder than he intended it to be.

Caldwell was not insensitive to what Burns was going through. He reached over and touched his shoulder. 'Don't worry, pal,' he said softly. 'We'll get her out. I promise you.'

'You know, Caldwell,' Burns replied. 'There are moments when I almost like you. Despite the clothes you wear.'

Caldwell grinned. 'That's part of my charm, didn't you know that?'

It was dawn when their plane taxied to a halt at Zurich airport and they climbed into the automobile. Caldwell had ordered

4 THE NIGHTMARE BEGINS

THE EARLY MORNING LIGHT entered the room making pale shadows on the soft green walls. Eleni tried to move, but her body reacted with a heavy reluctance she couldn't control. She let her head fall back on the pillow. She knew she was in a bed in a starkly furnished room, but that was all she knew. How she'd got there was a mystery. The last memory she had was the surging blurred faces of people. That and the sting of pain in her arm. She closed her eyes, permitting other memories to seep into her clouded brain. The sequence of events began with the telephone call from the man pretending to be from Maria Fowler, and ending with the injection in her arm. Out of sequence and unbidden came the thought of Coco Phillips. Cold fear enveloped her. Her eyes snapped open and she forced herself to raise up on one elbow.

She looked around the room. She saw only her bed, two straight-backed chairs, and a small metal table painted white. A fairly large window behind thin drapes was on the far side of the room. She slid out of bed, and was somehow not too surprised to see that she was dressed in a long cotton nightgown, hospital issue. She ran across the carpetless floor and drew back the drapes. The first thing she saw were the iron bars. Through them she saw snow. A thin white covering lay over the ground and frosted the trees. Beyond a high stone wall were towering, snow-clad mountains. The shock to her senses was staggering. Her last conscious memory had been a warm, sun-drenched Athens. My God, she thought, where am I? She fought down the rise of hysteria, and tried to force her mind into rational channels. The moment she did so she knew that from the look of the landscape she had to be somewhere in Switzerland. But why? And who brought her here? These questions were unanswerable. At least the second one was. She could guess at the first. She went back to the bed and lay down. Her heart began to pound so that she could hear it, fear mounting with its rhythm. She stared at the closed door. Who would come through it? And what would they do to her? Silently she prayed that she'd have the strength to withhold whatever it was they wanted to know, and to withstand whatever it was they planned to do. The effects of the drug not having completely worn off, she felt herself dozing. The last thought she had was of Burns.

The sun, still dim, was higher in the sky when she opened her eyes again. This time she saw at once that she was not alone. Two people were in the room with her. The woman, dressed in a nurse's uniform, was standing by the metal table, while an enormously fat man sat in a chair near the bed peering at her from tiny eyes almost hidden amid the pouches that surrounded them. His thick lips parted in a smile when he saw that she was awake.

'Good morning, *Kyria Alexandratos*,' he greeted her with cheerful solicitude. 'Did you sleep well?'

Eleni could only stare at him, as though hypnotized

'Would you like a bit of breakfast?' the man asked 'Or some coffee?'

'Who are you?' Eleni whispered 'What do you want with me?'

Kostandis raised a pudgy hand and chuckled 'One thing at a time, dear lady, one thing at a time First I want to make sure you're comfortable, because your well-being is most important to me We'll have lots of time to talk business later on' His chuckle stopped abruptly and his eyes hardened 'You'll not be going anywhere for a while'

'I want to know now,' Eleni insisted 'Who are you, and why have you brought me here?'

Kostandis leaned closer and she could smell the sour odour of him through the cologne he wore She turned her face away

'Who I am doesn't matter,' he said 'But what I want does' He paused meaningfully 'And I want Stavros Alexandratos As his wife you must know where he is Does that answer your other question?'

Eleni didn't reply 'Tell me where he's hiding,' the soft, purring voice continued, 'and you have my word that you will be allowed to return to Greece or Washington or wherever you please Don't tell me, and ' he let the rest of his sentence hang ominously suggestive in the silence

'My husband is dead'

Kostandis clicked his tongue against his teeth, shaking his head slowly from side to side 'I don't believe that story, my dear *Kyria* Alexandratos No more than most of the Greek people do'

'Yet he is dead,' she repeated, 'whether or not you do'

The warm chuckle rumbled forth once again 'Ah, dear lady,' he said 'Poor Kostis is not the fool he may appear to be because of his exterior For under this mountain of flesh lies intelligence, determination, and, if you'll excuse my mentioning it, cruelty The latter only if I'm pushed into it' He waited while his words sank in 'The men I work for do not

care a damn what methods I employ in order to get results They are interested only in the results. They have hired me to find your husband, and find him I will If I fail I shall be in a great deal of trouble Therefore I have been forced to take what for me is a rather drastic step I usually prefer the more subtle approach But whatever the method used, I intend to succeed For failure could very well mean my death And after all, dear lady, better for misfortune to befall you than me ' Again the chuckle while he watched the effect his words had on Eleni His expression was still benign as he continued 'So now that you realize the position we both are in, perhaps you will reconsider your statement '

Eleni clenched her fists under the covers, trying desperately to keep herself under control 'Stavros is dead,' she said from between tight lips 'And nothing you say or threaten to do to me can change that '

Kostandis nodded to the nurse who then began preparing a hypodermic syringe He fixed his eyes back on Eleni 'It is to be deplored that you keep on with your myth, dear lady I think you need a bit more sleep so that you will be in condition for our next talk '

The powerfully built nurse approached the bed holding the needle in front of her like a lance Eleni almost welcomed the injection which at least would bring temporary oblivion from frightening reality She permitted the sharp needle to enter her arm without protest

Kostandis pushed himself off the chair with a deep sigh, lumbered over to the door where he turned back towards her All benevolence was gone from his face, and his voice was hard as he spoke

'You may think you're being clever in not talking to me now, but when our dear doctor visits you later you'll wish you had He has methods of persuasion that I do not '

With surprising agility he whirled around and left the room, slamming the door behind him The nurse returned to the table and meticulously cleaned the syringe His words

were the last thing Eleni remembered before falling into a coma-like sleep, and they kept repeating themselves over and over in her brain as in a nightmare

5 NIGHTMARE CONTINUED

AS BURNS AND CALDWELL covered the long drive from Zurich to the isolated mountain village of Davos, Dr Heinrich Murer, now known as Dr Enrico Perez, sat behind a large bowl of flowers placed on his desk before him. He removed one, after carefully choosing it from among the others, and placed it in his lapel. He looked up at Kostandis sitting opposite him. 'As I was saying, you're in luck.' His voice was thin and deceptively mild. An incongruous match with his cold, hard eyes. 'This is the quiet time up here, and what few patients are at the clinic are all on the top floor in the private suites. No one will know of our new patient except Hilda, and as you recall she can be trusted.' He smiled, revealing large yellowed teeth peculiarly square shaped. 'Here in our little hideaway we can work undisturbed. You have nothing to fear.' His long, thin fingers clenched and unclenched as though already preparing themselves for the pleasure.

Kostandis averted his glance from the hypnotic flexing. 'It's very kind of you, Heinrich, to help me out like this.'

'Nonsense, Kostu. You were very useful to me in the old days, and I never forget a friend. Besides...' he smiled once more. 'I could use the diversion. It's years since I've done this sort of work.'

Kostandis felt an involuntary chill pass through his body. Many times in the past he'd experienced the same reaction. He couldn't help it as there was something about the man that had that effect. He watched as Murer rose from behind his desk and took off his jacket, replacing it with a long white surgeon's gown. The man hadn't changed much, he thought. A bit more gaunt than he'd been, and except for the purple splattering

of broken capillaries on his cheeks, he still possessed the grey complexion that blended with his grey eyes. Kostandis wondered if this total greyness was something natural with the man, or if, like some disease, he'd picked it up from his former patients at Auschwitz. As in the past he tried to shake off the eerie feeling the man engendered in him, but he couldn't.

'She should be awake by now,' Murer was saying. 'Would you like to join me?'

Kostandis felt his palms begin to sweat. He declined, saying he felt it would be more effective if Murer spoke with her alone.

'As you wish,' the doctor replied. He picked a brown envelope from his desk and strode from the office.

Eleni was sitting up in bed when the sound of the door opening caused her to snap out of the hopeless reverie she'd fallen into. She turned in the direction and watched as Dr Murer walked noiselessly to her side.

'So you are my new patient,' he said purringly. 'I wasn't told that you were so lovely.' The lids around his eyes narrowed slightly and relaxed almost immediately, as a gleam of appreciation displayed itself momentarily. Eleni felt cold. He introduced himself as Dr Perez and welcomed her to his clinic.

'But I'm not ill,' Eleni protested. 'Why am I here?'

Murer pulled up a chair and sat on it backwards, resting his folded arms across the back of it, his chin on his hands. 'My dear, this clinic is not only for sick people. It is also for healthy people who wish to be made either beautiful or . . . shall we say, different.' He smiled.

Eleni gritted her teeth in an attempt to appear defiant rather than frightened. 'What are you going to do to me?' she demanded.

Murer shrugged his narrow shoulders. 'Nothing, if you cooperate. My friend has a few questions he wishes you to answer. If you are as clever as you are beautiful you'll answer them. If not . . . ' he shrugged again. 'I take over.'

'May I have a cigarette?' Eleni asked in a small voice.

Still smiling, he extended his cigarette case and peered at her as she selected one with trembling fingers. He snapped open the matching lighter, and as she lit the cigarette his eyes roamed over her features appraisingly. She puffed deeply, trying to avoid his searching gaze.

'I've already answered your friend's questions,' she said when she'd gained a semblance of control over her jumping nerves.

'But not to his satisfaction, he tells me.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Forgive me if I say that I am not. Your stubbornness shall afford me the opportunity to refresh my techniques.' His smile was a bit rueful this time. 'I get so little chance these days. It's not like it was before.'

He reached into his pocket and brought out the brown envelope. From it he removed some photographs which he held out to her. 'These are a few of my masterpieces,' he said proudly. 'You'll find them most revealing.'

Despite herself, Eleni took the photographs from him and felt cold horror rise up in her as she looked at the first one. They fell from her nerveless fingers, and lay spread out before her in frightening array. With inexplicable fascination she stared at them. Horribly mutilated faces stared back at her. Eyelids twisted away from staring eyes, lips pulled into permanent grimaces, surgical scars that made obscene objects of what had once been human beings. She turned her head away.

'These poor unfortunates weren't like this when they came to me,' Murer explained in a tone used by a professor lecturing his students. 'They looked normal, or as normal as these people can look. What you see here was the middle stage of my work. In the final stage I was able, through the techniques I perfected, to restore them to a semblance of their previous normality. Had I left them in this stage, I doubt that they would be permitted to live among their fellow men.'

He picked up one of the photographs. 'This woman, for instance, was once as beautiful as you are. You may not believe

it, but I assure you she was. It was because of her stubbornness she was not restored to her former beauty. God knows where she is now.' He paused as though reflecting nostalgically on the past. With a small sigh he returned to the present.

'It would be a pity to have to treat you in the same manner, much as I could use the practise,' he said. 'And once I get started, should you then decide to speak, I'm not sure these old fingers still retain their former cunning.' His cold eyes, at odds with the guilelessness of his tone, held hers. 'I should then have to trust to luck rather than skill to make you presentable.'

Fear so constricted her throat that she was unable to utter a word. Murer picked up the pictures and carefully replaced them in the envelope. 'Oh yes,' he added as though the thought just struck him, 'I now use anaesthetic when I operate.' His tone became apologetic. 'Times change. One grows older.'

He stood up and walked towards the door. 'You have twenty-four hours to make up your mind,' he said. 'Meanwhile I suggest you dwell upon what you've just seen and heard.' He closed the door softly behind him.

Eleni fainted.

6 THE BIRD DOGS

BURNS AND CALDWELL drove into Davos exhausted but keyed up now that they were so close to their goal. September had brought with it an early fall of snow, and the manager of the hotel they checked into insisted that the cloudy day was in no way typical of the weather Davos had been enjoying. He explained that although they wouldn't be able to do any skiing, he could recommend either mountain climbing or swimming in the heated pools. 'You're between seasons,' he chided them. 'Another month and things will come to life.' He noticed their lack of luggage, and frowned. 'But you won't be staying long, will you?'

With his ingratiating manner, Caldwell told the manager that they dropped into Davos for a couple of days of walking and good mountain air. The lack of activities didn't disturb them at all. Eyeing them with suspicion, the manager showed them to their connecting rooms. They'd asked for two just to thwart his dirty mind.

After washing up, they decided to get the lie of the land before making any definite moves. Leaving the hotel, they strolled through the spotlessly clean village, trying to look as unobtrusive as possible. Others like them, either in pairs, in groups or singly, wandered as aimlessly as they did. Some of the younger of the residents were heading for a walk in the mountains, while their elders were content to sit in the cafes and sip hot chocolate. Burns mentioned how odd it was that in this tranquil setting they were about to explode a bomb.

'If only it were a real one,' Caldwell replied, 'it might wake this place up. Then maybe these people would see what's in their midst.' He looked around at the gingerbread architecture. 'Switzerland the untouched,' he muttered. 'What a lucky thing that it exists.'

They walked in silence for a while, then he turned to Burns. 'It's one of my personal hang-ups,' he said seriously. 'It probably began when I sat in on the Nuremberg Trials. But I still seem to see war criminals all around me when I come here.' He shrugged his wide shoulders. 'Sometimes I think I'm chasing the wrong people.'

Burns had no answer.

They stopped in at a bar that had a telephone, and looked through the directory for Dr Perez. The name was not listed. Clinics were listed, but they had no idea what his wife called. Caldwell decided that the best approach is the direct one, so adopting his wide-eyed tourist pose, he walked up to the proprietor. Within a couple of minutes he was back. He winked knowingly and strolled out into the street. Burns followed.

'Everyone knows the South American Doctor Perez,' Caldwell said once outside. 'The dear, kind ex-Doctor Murer is a

well respected member of the community His clinic is up there somewhere' He waved his arm in the direction of the snow-capped mountains that loomed about them High in the mountain meadows lights were beginning to cut through the purple haze 'One of those lights belongs to his place It's called the Eagle's Nest Nice name, isn't it? And familiar, too'

Burns grabbed his arm 'Let's go,' he said.

'Slow down, pal,' Caldwell cautioned. 'It'll be dark when we get there. No time to operate over terrain we know nothing about Besides, we need a plan' He linked his arm through Burns's 'Come on,' he said 'We'll get ourselves some of this good, healthy Swiss food, then see if we can come up with a workable plan A couple of drinks ought to help sharpen our wits as well What do you say?'

Burns agreed, but as they searched out a restaurant he couldn't help but look up at the pin-points of lights and think of Eleni up there, alone and frightened Although he saw the wisdom of waiting until daylight, he itched for immediate action

The plan they finally agreed upon was Burns's 'Go in fast,' he explained 'Hit and run so quickly that no one's sure what happened until we're out Surprise is the thing in such an operation'

The only obstacle was Kostandis Caldwell pointed out that if he were to spot them before they made their entrance, he could give the show away He would have to be drawn out somehow Before splitting up to go to sleep, they hit on a solution Burns spent a restless night, going over their plan of action a dozen times before finally falling asleep Then he dreamed of it

7 THE BAIT IS TAKEN

THE DAY STARTED EARLY at the Eagle's Nest Clinic. It was not yet eight but the desk clerk was already sorting index cards, other nurses were juggling breakfast trays and the burly German who acted as Dr Murer's bodyguard was sipping coffee in his quarters off the garden. In the private suites on the top floor, patients began their morning routines. The pair of incipient tuberculosis cases were taking their temperatures while awaiting their enormous breakfasts, the face-lift job was anxiously peering into her mirror trying to see through the bandage, wondering what her ageing skin would look like once the covering was removed. She worried about how her lover, younger than she, would react to it. The other two patients who were there merely to rest were still sleeping. The sole occupant of the floor below was sitting up in bed after a night of little sleep. Eleni looked out through the barred window and waited.

A few doors down the hall from her locked room, Murer and Kostandis were in the middle of a huge and sumptuous breakfast. Narrow stripes of pale sunlight crept through the large window of his office and stretched ladder-like across the table. Kostandis was toying with his food, but Murer was enjoying his immensely.

'I have the feeling that she won't talk,' Kostandis said abruptly.

Murer began to spread butter thickly and meticulously over a slice of toast. 'I share your feeling,' he said. 'Therefore I've already ordered the operating room to be prepared.'

Kostandis dropped his fork. 'You mean you're going through with it?'

'Of course I am. Didn't you want me to?'

Kostandis began to sweat. 'Well, not exactly,' he stammered. 'I thought you'd first use that as a threat, and then . . .'

'And then what?'

'Try something else '

'Like what?' Murer's tone was cold

'Oh, I don't know I thought you might use drugs A truth serum or something if she wouldn't scare '

Murer finished his toast and started buttering another 'That's not always effective,' he replied shortly 'And besides, I don't get many chances like this these days You don't want to deny me such an opportunity, do you?' His voice was a purr

Kostandis shook his head helplessly He berated himself for the desperation that had caused him to take such an action It was much too extreme for a man such as himself who so abhorred violence He weighed the idea of having one more talk with Eleni and try to convince her to talk before it was too late He was about to broach the idea to Murer, when the telephone rang The doctor wiped his mouth with a napkin, and reached over to the desk to pick it up

He listened to the voice that came over the wire, then handed the instrument to Kostandis 'Whoever it is, he's speaking a language I don't understand He seems to be asking for you, I gather '

Kostandis frowned in bewilderment Who knew he was here? He said a tentative hello in Greek The words that came back in his ear were Greek, and made his face blanch as he heard them Stuttering with excitement, he asked for them to be repeated, and down in the village in a phone booth near the railroad station Richard Burns said once again, 'I want my wife I'm ready to make a deal with you '

Thrusting his fat hand over the mouthpiece, Kostandis turned to Murer, his lips quivering so that he could barely form the words 'It's him,' he said 'Alexandros Down in the village He wants to make a deal with me '

'What kind of deal?'

'What kind of deal?' Kostandis repeated in Greek into the telephone Burns winked to Caldwell who was standing outside the booth The bait had been swallowed

'You free my wife,' he said slowly, 'and I'll give myself up to you. Meet me here in the village and we'll stay together until I see her board the train to Zurich. Then I'll go with you wherever you want me to.'

Kostandis's eyes narrowed shrewdly. 'How can I trust you? How do I know you won't kill me the moment she gets on the train? You come up here.'

'No.'

'You're in no position to be so difficult, Alexandratos.'

Burns grinned at the easy acceptance of his identity. 'Neither are you,' he replied confidently. 'You'll have to trust me as I'm trusting you. You might kill me as well. I'll be alone, you can bring as many bodyguards as you please.'

Turning a jubilant face towards Murer, Kostandis explained what had been said. Murer frowned. He told Kostandis that he could take his personal bodyguard with him, but that he would strongly advise against removing Eleni from the clinic on such a tenuous promise. He suggested that he first talk with the man, learn how trustworthy his offer was, then inform him that the only way to secure the release of his wife was to come up to the clinic. He urged Kostandis to assure him that they could, with this show of mutual faith, arrange an amicable exchange satisfying all parties. 'Then we'll see,' he added.

Acknowledging the cleverness of this tactic, Kostandis removed his hand from the mouthpiece and said that he'd come down first and talk before coming to any decision. Burns agreed readily.

Had Kostandis been more alert he would have noticed that it was too readily.

'I'll be at the Belvedere Hotel in an hour,' Burns told him. 'I'll wait for you in the main dining-room at the table in the far right-hand corner. I'll be alone.' Then to make it all sound legitimate he added, 'I warn you don't double-cross me.'

'And don't you double-cross me,' Kostandis came back at him. 'Just keep in mind that if I don't return after our meet-

ing, your wife will die' A sudden thought struck him 'Wait a minute How did you know where to find me?'

But Burns had already hung up

Since he had at least twenty minutes before having to leave, Kostandis finished his breakfast in high good humour He felt relieved that his trick had worked without having to resort to using Murer's handiwork on Eleni Delivering Alexandratos would erase all the previous months of failure He felt like singing

Murer cautioned him to be firm and not allow Alexandratos to talk him out of coming back to the clinic with him He then picked up the telephone and informed his private body-guard that he was to drive his friend down to Davos and to make sure that no harm came to him He stood by the window and watched until he saw the large black limousine disappear through the gate and down the tree-lined road Then he returned to his table and leisurely completed his meal Dabbing at his mouth with his napkin, he rang for his nurse

'Is the operating room ready, Hilda?' he inquired when she entered

'No, sir,' she replied in surprise 'You ordered it for five o'clock'

'Prepare it at once I've changed my mind'

8 HIT AND RUN

LOOKING BACK ON IT, Burns had to admit that it had been one of the worst planned operations he'd ever participated in. But they'd had no maps, no run-down of the people in the clinic, no blueprint or timetable It had to be executed in the simplest way possible and pray that the unexpectedness of it all would make for success Get in, grab Eleni and get out Cope with the obstacles as they arise

Caldwell was tense as he drove the large car, concentrating on the winding mountain road. The less he thought about the coming action the less chance he had of contemplating the madness of it. A small road that cut off the main one led directly up to the clinic. It formed a sharp bend to the right, and for a few hundred yards it was hemmed in by wooded slopes. Another bend to the left at a steep angle following the curve of the mountain and the trees thinned out giving way to a profusion of wild flowers. At the top was a protected little meadow in which stood the clinic.

After investigating the general area, Burns and Caldwell decided to drive back to the cut-off, take the car off the road and stay there until Kostandis passed them on his way down to their supposed rendezvous. With luck they'd be able to get into the clinic, accomplish their mission and get down the mountain before meeting Kostandis coming back. Burns's heart beat in excited expectation as they backed their car behind a thick clump of trees and waited. It was eight twenty-five. To make their nine o'clock appointment Kostandis should be leaving about now. They sat in tense silence, Caldwell's fists gripping the wheel while Burns checked the clip in his automatic.

In the mountain stillness the noise of the approaching automobile sounded overloud before they finally spotted it through the branches of their hiding place. As the car sped past them Burns saw only two men inside. He hoped it didn't mean that there were other bodyguards still left at the clinic. When he'd suggested to Kostandis that he could bring as many bodyguards with him as he pleased, he hoped he'd bring them all. Before he could feel too let down, they saw the car swerve sharply on to the main road, and disappear from sight.

Caldwell waited a count of ten before starting the engine, then he threw it into gear and with tyres screeching roared out on to the road and headed up towards the clinic. They remained silent all the way up, Burns nervously looking at his watch. It would take Kostandis a good half hour to get to the

hotel and find that the dining-room was closed. Then another five minutes or so through town to the mountain road, another fifteen back up to the clinic. With luck they should be off the mountain road before he got on it, and on their way to Zurich before he found out what happened. His heart leaped into his throat as they approached the clearing and drove through the gate up to the courtyard.

Wordlessly, they got out of the car and hurried up the steps and through the front door. Murer's nurse whirled in surprise at the sound of their footsteps. One look at them and she sensed that something was wrong. 'I'm sorry,' she said, trying to sound professionally imperious. 'But visiting hours are at three.' Then she saw the gun in Burns's hand. Her face went white.

'What do you want?' she demanded, her voice quavering now.

'Murer,' Caldwell said.

'He's with a patient,' she replied, forgetting herself.

Burns noticed that she was edging towards the desk. He placed himself in her way. His eyes were hard. 'We want the American lady who was brought in yesterday. And we want her now. Take us to her.' He waved the gun at her for emphasis.

The nurse hesitated. She knew what this meant. For she'd suddenly realized that they'd mentioned the doctor by his real name. She had to warn him somehow. But Burns's automatic was pressing against her ribs and his voice telling her to start walking or she'd be sorry. Stiffly, she led them down a corridor, praying as she did so that someone would come along to help her out of this spot. But no one did as the other nurses and orderlies were occupied upstairs with the private patients, and Franz had driven into Davos with that fat Greek. She cursed under her breath as she walked through the empty lounge into a smaller hallway and led the men up two flights of stairs. All the way her mind was racing. She had to do something, but didn't know what. She could only obey orders, and there was

no one now to issue any No one except this man behind her who kept poking his gun into her back

On the second floor she led them down a smaller hallway at the end of which was a door with the words 'Operating Room' printed in German on it The frightened woman stopped at the door next to this room and turned to face them 'They're in there,' she said as she pointed to the closed door

Burns pressed the gun against her 'Open it,' he ordered She did so and he and Caldwell followed her inside. They saw the figure of Murer bending over Eleni who was lying in the bed, her face averted from him Murer twisted his head in their direction, the frown of annoyance fading as he saw the two men with Hilda

'What is the meaning of this?' he said angrily

'We've come for your patient, Dr Murer,' Caldwell informed him Murer's face was impassive, but his fingers lost their grip on the hypodermic syringe and it crashed to the floor As though the sound of it were a signal, Eleni broke into choking sobs of relief Burns ran around the bed and took her into his arms, comforting her with words of assurance

Caldwell and Murer stood looking at each other from across the room 'You've used the wrong name,' Murer informed him quietly 'My name's Perez Dr Enrico Perez There is no Dr Murer here.'

'I know how well covered with legalities you are, Murer,' Caldwell said. 'But one of these days there'll be a crack'

Only Murer's eyes smiled as he replied 'Don't be too sure, my impetuous friend'

Caldwell stared in frustrated and impotent silence Burns was helping Eleni into a robe and pair of slippers that lay across her bed

'Let's go,' he said to Caldwell as she stood up

Caldwell's eyes were glittering in anger 'I have the strongest compulsion to take this son-of-a-bitch too.'

Murer's mouth tightened into an almost invisible line 'Take me where?' he questioned 'I haven't done anything

This woman was signed in as a patient, and I was merely performing my professional duties'

Caldwell looked at him speculatively 'I could turn you over to the Israelis,' he said 'They knew how to handle your friend Eichmann' He saw fear enter the doctor's eyes, and took pleasure at the sight

The nurse watched this interplay with desperate interest, and noticing the effect Caldwell's words had on Murer, she knew she had to do something Her glance fell on the buzzer near the bed If she could reach it she might be able to signal one of the orderlies How that would affect the situation she didn't stop to think, she was the only one who could help and she had to make the effort She looked at the others No one was paying any attention to her so she made her move

Burns noticed her first, and lunged for her Caldwell too turned in that direction, and in that precise moment Murer dashed for the open door At Burns's warning shout, Caldwell swung around and fired instinctively as he did so Murer fell. Burns threw Eleni over his shoulder in a fireman's carry

'Let's get out of here,' he said to Caldwell 'That should bring the whole house down on us' He tore out the door with Eleni over his back, as Caldwell followed a few steps behind, the screams of the nurse filling the air They raced down the corridor towards the elevator It wasn't there, so they dashed down the stairs At the first landing they ran headlong into a pair of orderlies who got out of their way with no argument the moment they caught sight of the gun in Caldwell's hand They reached the ground floor, pounded through the lounge, back down the long corridor and out the front door Windows flew open as excited faces looked out to watch them pile into the car

They raced towards the gate with Burns pointing his gun back at the building just in case But no one followed The screams got fainter as they sped down the tree-lined road Burns was in the back seat with Eleni while Caldwell, the accelerator down to the floorboards, manœuvred the curves at

top speed No one spoke They wouldn't relax until they were on the road to Zurich

With tyres squealing, the car swung sharply and turned on to the main road to Davos Approaching the bottom of the mountain the road took on a long, slow S-like turn As they entered the first loop of it they had a clear view of the bottom one They could see Kostandis's car coming up towards them

'Damn' The word exploded from Caldwell If Kostandis saw them he might turn around and follow He made his decision quickly 'Hold tight everyone,' he muttered 'Here we go'

In another second they were facing the oncoming car in the centre of the S Caldwell kept going, his knuckles showing white as he gripped the wheel The driver of the other car panicked He twisted his wheel sharply to the right to avoid the head-on collision Caldwell went for him Perspiration poured down Burns's neck as he wrapped his arms around Eleni to protect her from what he felt was a sure crash Everything seemed to be going in slow-motion as he watched the other car loom up before them Through his own windshield he could see the pop-eyed face of the other driver staring at them He swerved once more and too far, and went off the road just as Caldwell pulled out of his manoeuvre Burns heard the crunch of metal on metal as their bumper tore the rear fender off the other car As they straightened out, Burns looked back and saw the car end up sideways against a tree He saw Caldwell's hands relax on the wheel as he turned back and looked at them His face split in a wide grin

'Forgot to tell you I was once a stunt driver,' he said

'If you had mentioned that little fact to me,' Burns retorted, 'I'd have done the driving'

'I wanted to make sure they wouldn't be in any condition to turn around and chase us to Zurich,' Caldwell answered 'They could've made things sticky'

Once out of Davos, they began to breathe easier, and the questions that had been boiling within Eleni were answered for her Burns let Caldwell do most of the talking as he felt

guilty about havin' allowed her to go out alone, thereby exposing her to the danger that followed. Caldwell explained it all, and in so doing was forced to reveal his own involvement. Eleni didn't try to hide her surprise. She suddenly felt like the fish that fell out of the pan into the fire. She'd have to be more careful in the future, she decided. And not only about strangers.

It was when he mentioned Dr Murer and his past, that Burns was reminded of something that had been bothering him off and on since they'd sped away from the clinic. He couldn't help but be impressed by the many facets of this man who without doubt had saved Eleni's life. A far cry, he mused, from the jolly, annoying tourist with the loud shirts who'd dogged him in Athens. Not only the bit with the car, but the cool detachment with which he'd killed Murer. He had to bring it up.

'You could have shot Murer in the leg, you know,' he said suddenly, 'instead of killing him.'

'Yeah, I know.'

'Why didn't you?'

'I'm a lousy shot.' Then after a while he continued, 'Besides, I was only carrying out a sentence long overdue.'

Burns couldn't see his face, but he was sure the expression on it was more serious than the tone used to answer the question.

Part Four

'Let the end try the an'

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Henry IV

1 THE CANDY-COVERED DEAL

FAR BELOW THEM the city of Zurich faded into the distance. The sun-dappled lake with its bright-sailed boats grew more and more minute as their plane banked around and headed south. Eleni, dressed in the clothes hurriedly purchased on the Bahnhofstrasse, felt a surge of joy and relief at the prospect of being in Athens within a few hours. There were moments during the preceding day and a half in which she'd despaired of ever seeing it again. Now she was already relegating her recent adventure to its proper category of what to expect in the business she was in. Her two companions however were experiencing the letdown that comes after a long period of tension. Each was absorbed in his own thoughts. Burns was soberly considering his relationship with Eleni, recalling the strain it was under when they'd seen one another last in Athens. During the long hours of concern for her safety, he had berated himself for his foolish touchiness, and now he was wondering how he could repair the damage.

Caldwell had other things on his mind. Here he was sharing a plane with the only two people left who could possibly lead him to the man he wanted, and neither one showed any signs of so doing. He'd have to try a new tack. As always, he decided on the direct approach. 'I don't think you'll be very safe in Greece, Mrs Alexandratos,' he said, breaking the silence. 'If I were you, I'd make other plans.'

'Such as?'

'Such as accepting the proposition I'm about to offer you'

Here it comes, thought Burns The candy-covered deal Eleni too was alert to what was coming She waited, saying nothing Caldwell leaned towards her, his tone was sincere when he spoke

'It might not be a bad idea,' he said, 'if you and your husband came to the United States for a while At least for the next year or so'

'I admire your directness, Mr Caldwell,' Eleni replied 'And I'm sure you mean well That is from your standpoint'

'My standpoint is your safety I think I've already proven that'

'Yes you have And I can't thank you enough But safety has never been the consideration What's good for Greece is more important' She paused before continuing 'There are forces in Greece that would like nothing better than to eliminate the power that Stavros represents'

'Whatever work it is that you and your husband feel you must do, can just as well be done from the safety of the U S And I can assure you that I'll do all I can to guarantee that safety'

Eleni smiled 'May I ask who's behind that guarantee?'

'The United States Government,' Caldwell replied

'How nice of it' Eleni's smile widened 'And whose interest does it have at heart? Mine, Greece's or its own?' Before he could form a reply she went on More seriously this time 'Please don't think I'm ungrateful to you for what you've done, but just because you've saved my life does not mean you own it'

'Bravo,' Burns interjected Caldwell ignored him 'I'm sorry you feel that way, Mrs Alexandratos,' he said 'Why don't you talk it over with your husband and see what he thinks After he learns of this little adventure of yours, and realizes the possibility of more of the same now that time is getting short, he may not think my proposition is such a bad one'

Eleni held his look for a long time before replying 'It's

not up to my husband,' she said then 'It's up to me' She closed her eyes and leaned back in her seat, signifying the end of the discussion

Caldwell felt Burns's gaze upon him, and turned in his direction They studied each other in silence, as though seeing one another for the first time They barely spoke again all the way back to Athens

The late afternoon sun was slanting down on the Acropolis, its marble temples bright and golden Burns gripped Eleni's arm tightly as they walked away from the plane that had brought them back safely from the nightmare She pressed her body close to his as though telling him that it wouldn't be necessary to discuss the rupture that had occurred in their relationship He was more than grateful

Back at the hotel, Caldwell arranged for three adjoining rooms with Eleni placed between them 'What concerns you, Mr Caldwell,' she teased, 'my safety or my activities?'

He grinned at her 'I have to be honest Both'

'Well, you can relax as far as the latter is concerned,' she assured him 'I don't intend to go anywhere for a while. And as for my safety I'll scream if I need you For now, I'm going to have a hot bath and a nap. Then I'm going to order dinner sent up' She turned to Burns 'For two?' she added meaningfully

'For two,' he replied and grinned at Caldwell They stood outside her door until they heard the lock click, then Burns got serious

'Now then, Chuck,' he said 'How about us having a drink in my room to toast the end of our collaboration'

Caldwell grinned at him, and for a quick flash Burns saw the face of the loud-shirted tourist again Damn it, he thought The guy changes personality like a chameleon. He ordered a bottle of scotch to be sent up, and while waiting for it they once again sized-up one another

'Now let's have it,' Burns said after they'd each downed

their first drink and were nursing their second 'Do you intend to leave us alone, or do we have you with us for ever?'

Caldwell took a sip of his drink before replying 'Burnsie,' he said, and Burns cringed at how much the man could sound like MacDonald, 'I'm afraid you've got me. If not for ever, then at least for the foreseeable future. Unless of course Mrs A decides to accept our proposition and come to the States.' He studied Burns reflectively 'Why don't you help me convince her?' he asked after a while.

'Because it's her business not mine. And she seems to know what she's doing.'

'The people who want Stavros out of the way also know what they're doing. And they're getting more anxious all the time.'

'Does that include you?'

'Look pal,' Caldwell said 'My only anxiety is to finish my assignment. My boss wants Stavros, I go after him. I don't ask why so I don't get anxious.'

'That's the kind of defence Murer would've used,' Burns said quietly. Caldwell flushed.

'You're hitting below the belt, pal,' he said. He finished his drink in one swallow, and walked out of the room. Burns locked the door after him.

2 INTERLUDE

THEIR DINNER was on a cart wheeled into a corner of the room, the food steaming on steel plates above small round candles. Eleni stood alongside the cart, traces of the tension she'd been under still showing despite the effort she'd made with make-up. Her hair hung loosely about her shoulders, a startling contrast to the full length white silk robe she wore. Burns couldn't suppress a sharp intake of breath when he
 fered th r So truly Grecian he thought, it was like

stepping back a couple of thousand years. He felt strangely shy and reticent as they exchanged innocuous pleasantries. He still felt the weight of guilt concerning his treatment of her three days before, and since then they hadn't been alone long enough for him to say anything to ease the strain. And now that they were, he was at a loss to find the words.

'Are you very hungry?' Eleni asked, breaking into his thought. 'Or would you like a drink first?'

'A drink would be fine.' He watched as she poured out the scotch carefully, then added just the amount of water that he preferred. She handed him his glass and sat on the chair opposite. The awkward moment lengthened as they shared the same thoughts and memories.

Eleni had hoped that the barrier which had been erected would somehow be breached, and was disappointed that it still existed. She would have to make the initial move she was certain.

Burns was watching her as she lit a cigarette. He remembered the body that now moved so gracefully beneath the soft folds of her robe, and he was torn with wanting it. He cursed himself for having been such a self-righteous fool. He had to say something.

'Caldwell is determined to keep on following you,' he said, in order to take his mind off the subject.

'I know. But he's wasting his time. He'll never find Stavros through me.'

'Does that go for me too?' Burns couldn't help but ask.

Eleni sighed deeply before replying. 'I'm terribly tired, Richard. Not only from what just happened, but from what's been happening for more than two years. I need a rest. There are a lot of things I must think over.' She paused. 'I have a house on Paxi. Come with me there. We'll sun and swim and . . . ' She looked at him for a moment. 'And get to know each other again. Then I'll answer that question.'

Burns was silent. He didn't know how to respond to what was almost a plea. The perverseness in him that he wouldn't

too happy to acknowledge wanted her to suffer he had
He said what he didn't really want to 'I was thinking of
returning to London.'

'Can't you forgive me, Richard?' she asked in a low voice
'I didn't do anything so terrible'

'It would've saved a bit of misunderstanding if you'd trusted
me enough to tell me who you were,' he replied shortly

'Perhaps it would have But it wasn't entirely my fault
Come with me to the island and help me make my decision
Then I'll make up for it I promise'

'Caldwell will follow us, you know He wants his answer
too'

'He'll get it' She smiled for the first time. 'That's part
of my plan'

'Don't tell me you'll even consider his offer,' s 'd

'Of course not' She moved closer to him 'Will you trust
me enough to come with me?'

'The point is will you trust me?'

'I wouldn't ask you if I didn't Come with me to Paxi and
give me the chance to explain everything to you'

'And take me to Stavros?'

'If that's what you want' She stood up and walked to the
cart and checked the temperature of the food.

'It is and it isn't'

She turned and looked at him steadily, and he felt the
desire for her surge within him Damn the questions and the
doubts, he swore to himself And damn as well his loyalties
and sense of guilt They could be faced later He wasn't aware
that he'd got to his feet, but the next thing he knew he w
crushing her in his arms and feeling her lips hard against his

'Oh, darling,' she breathed in his ear, 'how I was waiting
for this'

Forcing a humorous note to keep his emotio from runni
over, he whispered back 'Not too loud. I'm sure Caldwell's
got his ear up against the wall'

'Don't worry He won't hear y screa r help.'

3 CAT AND MOUSE

CALDWELL was surprised when he received Burns's invitation to breakfast. He was even more surprised at the second one. A weekend on one of the Greek islands was about the furthest thin from his mind at this point. While he considered the offer from all angles, Burns watched him with amusement. He got a small charge of satisfaction in knowing he'd thrown his opponent a curve that he was having trouble handling. He couldn't resist pressing his advantage.

'Wh t's botherin you, Chuck?' he asked. 'You see somethin' wrong with the invitation?'

'I was just wondering why it was tendered, that's all.'

'Doesn't it occur to you that we love you for yourself?'

'Frankly, no.'

'The truth is,' Burns explained, 'Eleni feels you deserve a holiday after what you did for her, and this is her way of repaying you. As for me, I prefer inviting you along instead of having you follow us there. I don't think I could stand looking over my shoulder and seeing you in one of your god-awful shirts six paces behind.'

'Those shirts are my protective colouration. And I never get to wear them in Washington.'

'I can see why. Well, what do you say? You coming with?'

Caldwell hesitated. A gnawing instinct told him that there was somethin' else behind this invitation, but he was 't ble to put his finger on what it was.

He was visibly annoyed, and Burns was enjoyin his annoyance.

'Of course,' he teased, 'if you prefer to turn it down just so you can come on your own and play cat and mouse it's OK with us. But remember in that game it's move ent the cat's interested in. Once the mouse realizes that, and re als in one place, the cat has nothin' to do.'

'That's true But I'm gambling on the fact that time is running out, and the mouse can't afford to stand still '

They finished their eggs and bacon in silence, and it wasn't until they'd had their second refill of coffee that Caldwell made his decision 'All right,' he id 'If there are any strings attached, I may as well know about them You can book my p e'

Burns grinned at him 'It's already booked '

While Burns was reporting his success to Eleni, a half mile from the Grande Bretagne Nikos was standing in front of a tobacco shop looking into the window He waited impatiently until the place was empty of customers before entering. The shopkeeper motioned him to follow, and they walked through a small door which led to the rear Inside the darkened back room a teenage girl was busy stacking cartons of cigarettes on to the shelves The man told her curtly to stop her work and go out front and take care of the shop He closed the door behind her

'I got your message,' Nikos said as soon as they were alone

Without a word the thin, wiry man brought out a bottle, and filled two glasses with *retzina* Like Nikos, Tony was from Crete

They had known each other since childhood, and the bond between them was thick Few words were needed when they spoke

'Listen, Nikos,' he said after swallowing half a glass of the fiery liquid 'Don't be fooled by the easing up that's been promised Things are going to get tighter than ever Much tighter.'

Nikos just looked at him as he sipped his drink

'I have connections in Crete,' Tony went on 'And they tell me things And from what they tell me, I'm beginning to think that the day is coming when we'll look back on Papadopoulos's regime and wonder why we thought it was so bad '

Nikos's smile was a wry one 'You must be joking '

'I wish I were,' Tony muttered 'My advice to you is to get out while you still can'

'You're getting hysterical, old friend It's not like you'

'Six years under the Colonels is enough to make a saint hysterical'

Nikos peered closely at his friend for a long while and saw that he was in earnest He rubbed his chin thoughtfully before replying 'You may be right, but it has nothing to do with me I've been uninvolved for so many years everyone's forgotten I exist.'

Tony shook his head despairingly 'When things get as tough as they're going to get, you'll be surprised how quickly memories improve They won't care how long ago it was, all they know is that you were once with the Andartes and that'll be enough What you've done or haven't done since . or what you believe in now won't make the slightest difference They'll be lifting rocks to look for enemies and potential enemies. For Christ's sake, man, they think Papadopoulos is too far left'

Nikos thought for a long time. 'I can't go until I get my hands on that gold,' he said grimly. 'No matter what happens' He tossed down the rest of his *retzina*, and began to pace restlessly like a caged animal

'I've got to get to Burns He's the only one left who knows where it is,' he said as he paced

'What about Stavros?'

'I can't waste time now looking for him He's too protected But Burns is out in the open The only trouble is so am I He's not about to be pulled in as he was last time'

Tony tugged at his long moustache 'Bad luck with the girl,' he said

'Yes,' Nikos agreed. 'Bad luck But good luck that the police don't know where to pin it' He stopped his pacing and sat down at the table 'The Englishman is cleverer than I thought And I'm more certain than ever that he's out for the gold'

With nervous fingers he tore open a package of cigarettes,

only village grouped cosily around the harbour turning a dusky pink in the sunset. The land surrounding the village was a solid grey-green of olive groves that formed a frame to the harbour and buildings.

Burns watched Eleni's face reflect the beauty of what she saw, as they tied up alongside the fishing boats and masted caiques.

'It's all you said it was,' he admitted. 'And more.'

'That's why we chose it. It's not too well known to the tourist offices, and most foreigners prefer Corfu anyway. We loved coming here. Some of our most peaceful and happy times were spent on this island.'

The men on the dock gave Eleni a warm welcome, and some of them insisted on carrying their suitcases up to the villa. As they made their way past the fishermen's houses greetings were shouted and invitations for drinks offered. Burns noted that no one mentioned Stavros when speaking to her. Caldwell noticed it too.

The villa faced the sea from a different direction than the village did. From its terrace one could look out into the distance to where the sea and sky seemed to be one, no line of demarcation visible in the fading light. Burns was entranced.

'Well, what do you think of my little hideaway?' Eleni asked proudly as they walked around to the front entrance.

A long, low appreciative whistle was all Burns could manage. Caldwell did better. 'I've heard about such places,' he admitted. 'But I never really thought they existed.'

'They do,' Eleni said. 'And we were lucky to find this one.' At that moment the door was flung wide and Eleni was enveloped in the expansive embrace of a massive, middle-aged woman.

When the voluble greeting was over, the two men were introduced to the effervescent Sophia and her taciturn husband Athanassis. While Sophia was putting the finishing touches on the dinner she'd prepared, Eleni showed her guests around the house. It was a simple house built on two levels.

with all the rooms facing the blue Ionian Sea. Old wrought-iron bedsteads, carved wooden chests, straw chairs and bright coloured rugs made up the bedroom furniture, while overstuffed comfortable chairs and sofas filled the large living-room downstairs. On the wall over the stone fireplace hung a life-size portrait of Eleni that Burns recognized at once as having been painted by Stavros. He said nothing.

'This is where he liked to work,' Eleni said quietly as though reading his thoughts. Then they went into the dining-room and sat around a marvellous old refectory table where Sophia served them an enormous and delicious meal consisting of dolmades, moussaka, kalamarakı and succulent dishes Burns had never heard of. They stuffed themselves happily. After dinner they drank *ouzo* and listened to Eleni's collection of Greek music. It was the music, those strange and haunting melodies, that reached deeper into Burns than anything else since he'd come to Greece. He felt happy and melancholy at the same time.

Both he and Caldwell took their cue from Eleni who made a point of not once mentioning either Stavros or the questions that had to be answered. Pleasantly fatigued, they went upstairs to their bedrooms and bid each other good night. But tired as he was, Burns couldn't sleep. He knew that Eleni was waiting for him, and he knew he wanted to go to her. But he was prevented from doing so by that portrait over the fireplace. It was as though Stavros himself was in the house. It was a long night.

5 BETRAYAL

YOUSSEF leaned on the railing of the small balcony, breathing the warm night air. Soon it will all be over, he thought. Soon his liberation would be at hand. From inside he could hear the loud singing emanating from the bathroo as Kostandis luxuriated in his preliminary bath. Youssef studied

his hands gripping the iron rail. He loved the way his gold ring shone in the moonlight, the ruby eyes of the intricately carved snake winking knowingly. Soon he would be able to afford more such lovely possessions, and not have to depend on the whims and favours of others to pay for his little luxuries. He would have his own money, and be his own master. Pleasure lit his face as his mind went back to the meeting the day before with that intense man in the little room of the hotel near the railroad station. Wondrous indeed, he mused, how these men had eyes that saw everywhere. Better to work for men such as these, than for their underlings such as Kostandis. Better for one's self-respect and better for one's purse. His cleverness pleased him.

The singing stopped, and he heard the splashing sounds of the heavy body leaving the tub. Strangely calm, he stepped back into the bedroom, closing the blinds after him. Silently he moved across the thick rug towards the bed, a slim shadowy figure, bare-footed and bare-chested, clad only in the wide, voluminous Turkish trousers. Kostandis liked. Around his middle he wore a sash of scarlet silk. He switched on a blue bed lamp, and lay back on the soft pillows. A smile of anticipation played on his sensuous mouth.

Kostandis padded in from the bathroom, his embroidered robe flung carelessly open, and sat down alongside of the reclining Youssef. He beamed with pleasure and expectancy as his eyes roamed appreciatively over the boy's body. 'Ah, my Youssef,' he crooned. 'You're so lovely to look at, it's almost too much for me. I am convinced God made you just to prove that the image of man can indeed be beautiful.' He ran his hand caressingly over the smoothly muscled chest. Had he looked up he would have seen the grin that came over the boy's face. He wouldn't have liked it.

'And what was he thinking when he made you?' Youssef asked. 'It's almost too much for me as well. So soft and paunchy with veins on your legs that stand out like bunches of purple grapes. Your waist—so thick one cannot know where your

stomach begins, and where it stops is also something ridiculous' His laugh ended in a high giggle.

Kostandis paled under his usually rosy complexion. This had never happened to him before. Youssef had always been a well-behaved boy, grateful and generous. Evil words such as these had never passed his lips before. Something had gone wrong, someone had poisoned his mind. He was so distraught that he kicked out at his little dog who was licking his still damp feet. He forced himself to speak. 'What's wrong, my pigeon?' he asked. 'What's happened that makes you talk so to your poor Kostis?'

'Nothing's happened,' Youssef replied. 'It's just that I'm seeing you for the first time and you disgust me. I'm not going to look like you when I grow old. Not I. I'll always be beautiful.'

'Of course you will, my little fawn. Why shouldn't you? You're more beautiful now than I ever was. And you have something I never had. You have a protector. Someone who appreciates your beauty and lives only to make certain you keep it always.'

He slipped out of his robe and lay alongside the rigid body of Youssef. 'Now tell me you were only teasing me, my lovely,' he purred. 'Tell your poor Kostis you didn't mean all those cruel words.' The boy was silent. Kostandis sighed wearily. 'You mustn't blame me for my grossness,' he went on. 'I've often tried to become slim for you, but it's impossible. I've tried many times for I realize I'm not as nimble as one should be in my business. In Switzerland, for example, had I been more agile things wouldn't have turned out as they did.' He shifted his bulk and leaned over the boy, resting his weight on his hands. 'But let's not talk of that now, my precious one. Let's talk only of ourselves and of our future together.'

Youssef raised his left arm and drew Kostandis closer with it. When the flabby face was almost touching his own, he whispered, 'We have no future together.' Before the significance of those words could penetrate his brain, Youssef's

knife slid out of its hiding place in the shirt and penetrated his stomach. It sank in with the ease of a war knife entering a tub of lard. Kostandis took a long time to die, and he died knowing he'd been betrayed.

6 BEWARE OF GIFT-BEARING GREEKS

THE THREE DAYS on Paxi passed in a haze of lazy pleasure. The vacationers spent most of their time swimming in the warm sea, and growing tan on the soft sandy beach. When they weren't occupied with these well needed diversions, they were consuming Sophia's food, Turkish coffee and *ouzo*. They did everything except talk about the subject uppermost in their minds. Burns meanwhile was finding Eleni more beautiful and desirable than ever in the simple surroundings of the island, and in one way was not too anxious to pressure her for her answer concerning Stavros Caldwell. On the other hand was getting restless. Eleni sensed his restlessness, and tried to divert it by informing them of the history of the islands nearby. She told of Ithaki, which is believed to be the home of Ulysses, and of the chapel built on the ruins of Homer's school.

Caldwell's mind wandered. Legends and archaeological ruins held little interest for him, but he became suddenly alert at her next sentence.

'There's a small village called Stavros on Ithaki,' she was saying. 'My Stavros was born there. His family lived there for generations and gave that name to many of their children. The town dates back to 2200 B.C.' She looked from one man to the other, but neither made any comment to what she'd said.

She rose from the table where they'd just finished lunch, and placed her hand on Caldwell's shoulder.

'I can see you're anxious to get my answer, Mr Caldwell,'

she told him 'It won't be long now I've made up my mind to give it tonight after dinner'

'I hope it's the right one,' he said

'It is,' she replied Then she turned to Burns 'I think I'll go for a walk on the beach before my nap Want to come along?'

'I sure do,' he said as he got to his feet

They excused themselves to Caldwell, and he watched as they walked down to the beach and strolled along the water's edge

'Is there really a town called Stavros on that island?' Burns asked the moment they were out of earshot

'Uh huh'

'But Stavros told me he was born in Itea'

'He was' Eleni laughed merrily

'Well, excuse me for being so dense, but I don't get it'

'You're not supposed to, and neither is he' She took his hand in hers and swung it as they walked 'It's a red herring, darling,' she said 'It'll keep him occupied after you and I have gone'

'I see And would it be rude of me to inquire where we are going?'

Eleni's laughter exploded

'Oh, Richard, you're so British'

'And curious as well'

'You'll have to wait,' she teased

Dinner that night was eaten on the terrace, and the meal as usual was vast and delicious Egg and lemon soup, red mullet cooked in wine, chicken roasted with herbs, cheese and fruit

and the strong resinated wine Eleni didn't drink much, and Burns, taking his cue from her, held back as well Caldwell kept his drinking to a minimum as he wanted to have a clear head for what might develop after Eleni gave her answer to his proposition. Thus Burns was surprised to see Caldwell become suddenly slack-jawed and empty-eyed his head

lolloped forward on to his chest. His body seemed to collapse within itself and he slid off the chair to the floor.

Before Burns could say a word, Sophia and her husband appeared from the kitchen. Athanassis lifted the inert figure, flung it over his shoulder, and hurried from the room. Sophia placed the two suitcases on the floor. 'You must hurry,' she said.

'What the hell is going on?' Burns asked in exasperation.

'Later, dear,' Eleni said as she picked up her suitcase. 'The boat's leaving in a few minutes.'

On the way to the harbour she explained that this boat was the last one to put in to Paxi for forty-eight hours. That would give them two full days away from Caldwell. And when he finally could get off the island, he'd most likely head immediately for Ithaki searching for Stavros. 'That was why I planted the red herring,' she concluded. 'Just to make sure.'

Burns shook his head in wonderment. 'You're amazing,' he said admiringly. 'Simply and absolutely amazing.' He frowned at her. 'That wasn't exactly a nice thing for a hostess to do to her guest, you know. Spiking his wine like that.'

'I did not spike his wine. I spiked his food. There was always the chance he wouldn't drink, being a suspicious man, but I knew he couldn't resist Sophia's cooking.'

'As I said before, you're amazing.'

At the pier they were surrounded by the press of passengers carrying either paper bags filled with food, chickens in wooden crates, battered suitcases or huge woven baskets. All about them were men, women and children in excited confusion, joyful and loud. As they fought their way up the gangway, Burns and Eleni were unaware that they were being followed. As unaware now as they had been for the past day and a half that every move they made was being reported back to Nikos in Athens.

They juggled their suitcases down the narrow corridor to their stateroom, while Tony made himself comfortable in the tourist club lounge just off the gangway. He'd be there in

the morning, this unobtrusive shadow, to take up his job once more. He fell asleep almost at once, pleased at the way things were going. The last thought he had was of gold.

Inside the cabin Burns was silent. Without asking he knew that they were on the home stretch. All questions would soon be answered, and all loose ends neatly tied. But now that it was this close, he was reluctant to have the answers or the neatly tied-up ends. For a while his quest had begun well enough, it was turning out badly. The old friend he wanted to help had become a rival, someone to be envied and perhaps even hated. The knowledge that this could very well be the last night he would have with Eleni, chilled him. He saw that she was watching him intently, as though trying to read his thoughts.

'What made you finally decide to trust me?' he asked.

'Mino,' she replied. 'He was satisfied that you aren't working for anyone, that it was your affection for Stavros and nothing else that brought you back to Greece.' She moved over and sat beside him on the bunk. 'Please, Richard,' she said. 'Stop building barriers. I love you, you foolish, principled Englishman. Can't you get that through your head?'

He held her close. Of course he got it through his head. And it drove out everything else. He kissed her. Then he kissed her again. Tomorrow would be time enough to face her husband and all the neatly tied ends. Tonight is something else, he thought. One thing at a time. He reached out and flicked off the light, plunging the cabin into darkness.

7 OUT IN THE COLD

WHILE CALDWELL was sleeping his drugged sleep, and the inter-island steamer was plodding its way to Igoumenitsa on the mainland, half-way around the world the sun was setting in Washington, D.C. The man who had kicked off Burns's

precipitous trip to Greece was sitting at his desk deeply absorbed in a relief map of that country. Leaning over his shoulder was George Anderson, chewing on his ever-present cigar.

'Rough-looking place for a country so small,' he commented.

MacDonald grunted. 'The U S is seventy times bigger, yet I'm having more trouble trying to trace Caldwell there than I would have getting hold of someone here in ten minutes.' He folded the map in annoyance. Anderson sat down in a chair and removed his shoes.

'Why the sudden rush to pull him in?' he asked as he rubbed his corns affectionately.

'Because things are moving too fast and the boys upstairs want him pulled in.'

'What about Alexandratos?'

'Expendable. They don't think he matters that much anyway. The whole thing was my idea to begin with, now we'll have to let his countrymen handle him.' He pounded his desk in sudden anger. 'How the hell am I expected to save a guy when he doesn't want to be saved.'

'Ah,' Anderson grinned, 'so that's what you were trying to do. Save him.'

MacDonald whirled around. 'Don't get cute with me, George,' he growled. 'I'm not in the mood. Bad enough I've got my conscience to deal with, I don't need you to needle me.'

'Sorry. Didn't mean to rub your fur the wrong way, Harry. It's just that I never did quite understand this whole love of yours. I still don't.'

MacDonald began pacing up and down the small area in front of his desk, his fists balled inside his pockets. 'To be honest, neither do I. I never should've let my personal feelings get in the way. It's bad for business. But when I saw that everyone was out to get him, even though he was supposed to be dead, I felt I had to get him out. And it would've served a double purpose. Getting him out of the way, and saving his life.' He paused. 'And in this particular case the second

purpose was of more importance to e ' He sat down behind his desk before going on

'My hang-up in this case from the beginning was that I saw Stavros Alexandratos as two men One a great artist, and the other, one of those so-called patriots who always hold things up Counter to my better judgment I thought I could save the artist, to get him out before they sent him to one of those penal islands of theirs But now it's getting too late The shit is about to hit the fan and I don't want to get myself splattered Now Stavros the artist will have to pay the check for Stavros the patriot I can't stick my neck out for him any more '

Anderson nodded his understanding 'And your pal Burns?' he asked after a moment. 'Won't he get splattered?'

'If he does it's his own fault From what Caldwell reports he's got himself too deeply involved If he wants to come out he can come out with Caldwell If not ' he shrugged and let the sentence hang 'I've got to take care of number one If a wrench falls into our set-up there because of me, my head'll fall to And after all, whose head is more important, his or mine?'

Since the question was obviously a rhetorical one, Anderson allowed it to remain unanswered

Not too far distant from MacDonald's scene of conscience-purging, Maria Fowler was in the act of opening the afternoon mail The letter from Eleni she had to read twice in order to fully comprehend its full meaning It was hastily scrawled

'Someone claiming to come from you kidnapped me three days ago I'm all right now, but it looked bad for a while I suggest you check the people around you for a leak I will accept no word from you unless it comes through M '

Maria Fowler stared at the slip of paper in her hand, its import throbbing through her brain Who could be the leak Eleni suspected? Whom could she check? The maid came in

only to clean and was never allowed alone in the office. She had no access to the files at any time. That left only Stella, and her mind refused to accept that possibility. Stella had been with her for years and was trusted as much as anyone could be. Yet she was the only person who knew everything about their operation in Washington. Maria Fowler's heart sank. Could this be the answer to some of the bad luck that had from time to time befallen their work? Such—the recent murder of one of their best operatives? She pressed the buzzer on her desk, reached into the drawer and withdrew her revolver. She could hear Stella's footsteps approaching her door. Then it opened.

When Caldwell finally awoke it was daylight with the sun, hot yellow globe in a cloudless blue sky. He staggered to the bathroom and doused his head under the cold water tap. He knew he'd been drugged by the fuzzy feeling in his head, the heavy eyelids and the dark brown taste in his mouth. He'd been in a spot like this once before and now cursed himself for being in it again. Blinking the water from his eyes he saw the note propped against the coffee pot on the night table. He winced as he read it.

'Sorry. No way to behave to someone who helped save my life, but in this business certain things become necessary even if we don't like to do them. The next boat will put in tomorrow night, so enjoy your holiday. Sophia will take care of you. Hope to see you again to apologize in person.' It was signed Eleni A.

A string of curses flowed from him as he dropped the sheet of paper to the floor and kicked at it. What a fool he'd been. What a goddamned blind amateur to let himself be taken like this. And by a woman at that. Planned the whole thing even before they left Athens, he was sure. Ungrateful bitch. No way to act to someone who saved her life was right. He too hoped they'd meet again. Then in spite of himself he smiled. He

couldn't help but appreciate the neat way he'd been taken. He'd have to think up a good alibi for MacDonald when the time came. This thought wiped away the smile and his anger returned. It was burning furiously by the time he got downstairs and faced the smiling Sophia standing alongside the table ostentatiously set for one.

'Eat,' she commanded, pointing at the food. 'It's all right now.' He glowered at her.

'Thanks a lot,' he snapped and sat down. Hunger outweighed anger, and besides the food smelled and looked too tempting to resist. But he couldn't enjoy it. His mind was racing with plans. He had to get off the island, and get off fast. And he sure as hell wasn't going to wait for the next boat, he told himself. He pushed his plate away as his irritation grew. He had no doubt what their gambit had been. To go to Stavros and make sure he couldn't follow. But where? Where were they?

Then it struck him. Of course. In her attempt to play the charming hostess, Eleni had given it away. Ithaki. The nearby island with the village named Stavros. What a natural place to hide out. He slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. What a sucker he'd been. OK, he thought, calming down a bit. OK Mr Burns. Two can play at this game.

He shoved himself back from the table so hard that the chair overturned, and he dashed from the household for the harbour to try to hire a private boat. He had a lot of money and there were a lot of fishermen with boats, he assured himself as he ran.

Late season tourists surged through the streets of Athens mingling in the crowded bars and cafés with American sailors on shore leave, and Greek businessmen discussing their affairs over coffee or *ouzo* in loud voices and with expressive gestures. In a far corner of one of these crowded cafés, two men sat at a table talking intensely in low tones, their manner a distinct contrast to the expansiveness around them. Argyri, Mino's

brother, was digesting the information Mino had just given him

'To tell you the truth, Mino,' he said guardedly, 'I always thought it was just a rumour. Something that would never happen.'

'I gue we all thought that,' his brother replied. 'Or tle t hoped it. But now it's at hand. Petros thinks it was the announce ent of an electio that made the advance their date.'

'And you think they'll try for an actual take-over?'

Mino shrugged. 'They're desperate enough to try it. And crazy enough to succeed.'

The brothers sipped their strong, pungent coffee in silence, each thinking of the dark days to come for themselves and their country. Mino finally broke the silence.

'Damn it, I wish I could speak with Stavros. It would help to know what he's plannin' to do about this. Until we hear from him we'll all have to o under and see what develops.'

'What about Eleni?'

'What about her?'

'Shouldn't we war her?'

'She's been warned,' Mino replied. 'She and Richard have gone off together.'

'To e hi?'

'I gue so.' A worried expression tled on Mino's face. 'I think she should get out. We don't want to have happen to her what happed to Lady Fle in.'

Argyri glanced at his watch. 'I've got to get back.' He pushed his chair back, and as he did their eyes met and held. 'Mino.' His voice was choked. 'What are we oing to do?'

Mino held his glance steadily. 'Do?' he echoed. 'What we've always been prepared to do. Offer our lives for Greece.'

'A ai?' sighed his brother.

'Agai d lw ys...'

8 THE WALK OF A HUNDRED STEPS

THE NARROW MOUNTAIN ROAD twisted and turned upward as Eleni skilfully manœuvred the sharp corners while avoiding the overhanging shrubs 'I can see you've driven this road before,' Burns commented

'Not in years,' she admitted 'I usually approach by an alternate route It's longer but easier But this is more scenic' She handled a particularly dangerous curve, then glanced over to him 'You've been here before too, haven't you, Apollo?'

Her use of his code name startled him It was as though she were acknowledging him as a comrade to be trusted He admitted that he had That he was familiar with the villages, the caves, and every shrub big enough for a man to hide behind He peered about him at the rugged countryside that was becoming ever more familiar 'This was my home for almost a year,' he said softly

'I'm glad you used the word "home",' Eleni remarked 'Why?'

'Because you've been fighting that admission, haven't you?' Burns was silent Her words had struck a sensitive nerve

'We all fight the past in one way or another,' she went on 'Why should you feel guilty about it? Your mistake was in trying to block it out of your life' She took her hand off the wheel and lay it on his own 'We love each other, darling, and nothing can change that Especially the past As for the future just be patient a while longer and the past you've been avoiding with such desperation will help clear away your doubts You'll see'

Burns smiled and pressed her hand 'I'd give anything to be able to see you in America for once Here you seem to be the personification of the true Mediterranean in everything you say and do I'd like to see you when your other half takes over'

'You're wrong The true Mediterranean follows the dictates

of his heart rather than his head I've been doing the opposite. If I hadn't, we would've made this trip long before this and saved a lot of time and trouble.'

She smiled significantly at him, and turned back to her driving. Once they passed the city of Ioanina the paved road ended, and she had to devote all of her attention to avoiding the stones and ruts that lay in their path. When they reached the smooth portion after a few miles, she relaxed. As they rounded a sharply curving bend, Burns gasped at the sight that suddenly appeared before them. The cliffs of Meteora looming tower-like to the skies. He was speechless as he gaped at the incredible formation of rocky spires that dominated the entire plain like gigantic cavity-filled teeth. More than eighteen hundred feet high, the weirdly shaped rocks hung over them in a manner almost menacing. Perched on top of the cliffs themselves he could see the six 14th-century stone monasteries, the only ones remaining from the original group of twenty-three.

'My god,' he whispered in awe. 'Meteora. I'd forgotten how staggering it can be when you come upon it suddenly. Is that where we're going?'

Eleni nodded. 'The end of the road, Richard. Here among these fifty-million-year-old towers you'll get your answers.'

'So this is where he is.' It was a statement rather than a question. Eleni guided the car around the precipitous bends on the final lap of their trip in concentrated silence. As they neared the first of the monasteries Burns related how they'd operated in this area during the war, and he admitted to being a fool in not realizing what a perfect hideout this was for Stavros. 'It hasn't changed much,' he commented. 'And why should it, considering its inaccessibility?'

'That's why it was chosen.' Eleni felt his quick look, and changed the subject. 'Only four of the six monasteries still standing are visited by tourists,' she informed him.

'Which are we going to?'

'The sixth.'

Burns shot another glance in her direction. He couldn't help but admire the dramatic brevity with which she said it. The drive up to the top where the monasteries perched precariously upon the barren peaks took longer than he expected, and during it he could feel Eleni's excitement. While he experienced a similar excitement it was dampened by the apprehension he'd felt the night before. Here at the cliffs of Meteora he'd have his answers and say goodbye to Eleni. Well, he philosophized, he'd asked for it. The price for the truth certainly came high. He forced himself to concentrate on the view.

Each monastery was isolated from the other, and each looked uninhabited and foreboding. The last one perched like a citadel atop its peak, aged stone walls built right to the edge of the cliff with nothing outside them but the sheer drop. The bareness of the cliff face broken only by the rope-drawn nets and ancient ladders by which supplies were once hauled up from the valley below before the road was built. On this road, such as it was, Eleni guided the car carefully until they came to a small courtyard. She switched off the ignition, and heaved a deep sigh of relief. As they climbed out of the car, Eleni took his hand and led him around a corner to the foot of a narrow stone staircase. Looming above them was the monastery itself, looking awesome and eternal. She pointed up to the rounded wooden door that could be seen at the head of the steps.

'There it is, darling,' she said. A chill hand gripped his heart as he looked up at the closed door. Here he was at last, at the end of the road. A deep stillness pressed in on them broken only by the far-off tolling of bells.

'Let's go,' he said, and they began to walk slowly up the hundred stone steps to where the answers lay.

9 THE MONASTERY

THEY WERE ADMITTED into the main hall by a hooded monk who displayed neither surprise nor recognition. Unspoken words seemed to pass between him and Eleni, and he motioned for them to follow. Their footsteps echoing hollowly through the vaulted corridors, they made their way through the vast stone maze. After a series of cell-like rooms that flanked their path, they entered a fairly large entryway with windows looking out over the land around the monastery. Burns stopped. He walked to a window and stared at the view that had caught his attention. He signalled for Eleni to come over and look.

'I've seen this view before,' he whispered. 'In a painting done by Stavros.'

She smiled. 'Yes, I know you did.' Her hand reached for his and she motioned towards the monk. 'Come along,' she said. 'He's waiting.'

They followed the shrouded figure down a narrow stairway that led windingly downwards into the dim bowels of the monastery. The seemingly endless circular motion made Burns feel dizzy and directionless, and in order to keep himself from becoming hypnotized he forced his mind to concentrate on what was about to happen. Stavros. The man who had become the crossroads of his life. With each step downwards he was drawing closer to the moment of decision, and like most people he searched for an excuse to postpone it. But it was too late. He'd come too far and gone through too much to even think of turning back from it.

The staircase came to an abrupt end in front of a heavy carved door. The monk knocked once, then stepped aside to allow them to enter. He closed the door as they did so, and remained outside.

It was a large sunny room, bare of furniture, with one circular window cut out of the stone that commanded the same

view that Burns had seen upstairs. At the far end of the room was a large old-fashioned easel with an unfinished canvas on it. Standing in front of the easel with his back to them, was a tall, robed figure. His brush in hand, he was caught in a moment of intense concentration and hadn't heard the knock or the entrance of the two people. His head swivelled from the canvas to the landscape outside as though seeking some secret of colour hidden there.

Burns noted the width of his draped shoulders, the carriage of his muscular neck, the thick greying hair that covered his massive head. It was suddenly all so simple.

'Stavros.' It was a whisper, but rang out like a shout.

The figure turned around slowly.

The face Burns saw was one of great strength, but ageing. The burning black eyes were sunken, and the cheeks were hollow. Deep creases ran down from the sides of the nose to the ends of full lips that held a gentle smile. Burns blinked as the figure moved closer. It was Stavros, yet it wasn't. It was more what Stavros would look like at the age of sixty, but Stavros was not anywhere near that age.

The monk's smile widened as though he could read Burns's thoughts. His voice when he spoke was deep and as gentle as his expression. 'I am his brother, Vassos,' he said.

The let-down was tremendous. Burns felt his stomach sink, and the blood drain from his head. He looked from Eleni to this man standing so calmly before him, then back to Eleni before he found his voice. 'I don't understand,' he said weakly.

'You will,' Vassos replied. Then he took Burns's hand in both of his, and gripped it with sincere warmth. 'Yassou, Apollo,' he said. 'I've wanted to meet you for many years.'

'Yassou,' Burns answered, not yet completely over the shock. 'Stavros spoke often of you and of your sacrifices for Greece. He loved you very much, you know.' He released Burns's hand, and turned to Eleni. 'You're all right?' he asked.

She nodded.

'And you're happy again?'

Her answer was in her eyes.

Burns took advantage of this exchange to walk to the easel. He scrutinized it carefully, and when he turned around he was looking into the amused face of Vassos 'I saw one like this, only smaller,' Burns said 'It was dated 1965'

'And you didn't believe what you w'

'I knew who painted it, but I didn't believe the date. The painting looked too recent'

Vassos nodded in obvious satisfaction

'Then I succeeded'

'Succeeded in what?'

'The picture you saw, plus a few others, was done by me.' A note of pride crept into his voice 'And if I wished to make them appear older, I assure you I could have' He paused to enjoy the look of astonishment spreading over Burns's face 'But I purposely didn't do so It was my intention to have sharp-eyed experts like yourself see through my subterfuge Not in its execution you understand, but in its age'

Burns could only stare at this man who so calmly revealed the fact that he was an accomplished forger He tried to find a reason behind what he'd just been told, but it was obscure. Yet he knew there had to be one 'If I understand you correctly,' he said, 'you intend to lead people into thinking Stavros is alive and pretending to be dead so that he can carry on his work in safety Is that it?'

'Exactly. And you put it well, too Not to tell them but to lead them into thinking it You see, by discovering it for themselves they are more apt to believe it'

'Clever Very clever Except I don't see the purpose Why plant the suspicion of his being alive when being dead is such a perfect cover?'

'Because he really is dead'

Before he could recover from the shock and confusion this simple statement caused, Burns felt Eleni's hand on his arm

'It's the truth, darling,' she whispered 'I never lied to you'

He controlled the bewilderment that swept through him,

and turned from her to Vassos. 'So be sure as hell owes me an explanation,' he said.

'That's the reason you were brought here,' Vassos told him. 'Come. We'll have our talk while we wait for lunch to be prepared.' He placed his large hand on Burns's shoulder, and led them both through a side door into his cell-like room.

The two visitors made themselves as comfortable as they could on the hard wooden chairs, while Vassos paced slowly up and down the small room, gathering his thoughts to ether before speaking.

'You are now in the very heart of one of the resistance groups operating in Greece,' he began suddenly. 'Here inside this monastery we are planning and preparing for the day when we may be called upon to restore democracy in our country.' He paused for a long moment, and Burns wondered if that were all he was going to say. Then, as before, he began abruptly. 'When Stavros died, it was apparent to Eleni and myself that his death would deal a great blow to our struggle. My brother was the sort of man people need to rally around. They need the hope he holds out to them while we wait. They need as well the knowledge that men such as he are still here to serve as a bulwark between them and oppression. Granted he's but one fish in our pond, but we must keep all the fish we can. For without them the water will turn stagnant, and die.'

These words of Vassos's brought his friend back sharply to Burns's memory. It was just these qualities that had bound him to the man. The same vitality that made it so difficult for him to accept his death. He jerked his attention back to what Vassos was saying.

'Stavros has a personal hold on the morale and imagination of our people, and the forces that would destroy Greece fear both him and his hold. If they knew for certain that he was lost to us, they would make good use of it; you can be sure. So they must not know. And those who need his glue in order to stay together in the fight, must not know.' He smiled for the first time since he'd begun talking. 'We Greeks suffer from

what we call *hubris* The sin of Pride It is because of this pride that Stavros must remain alive In order for our people to have their *hubris* their pride in the knowledge that the fight goes on'

He continued by explaining that as a young an he'd studied painting, and taught Stavros all he'd learned They'd developed an almost identical style, so that it wasn't too difficult for him to paint with the me technique in order to create the pictures that would pass as Stavros's

'Our idea Eleni's and mine . was to have these paintings serve a two-fold purpose,' he concluded 'One was to bring in funds with which to purchase arms, and the other was to keep my brother alive in the minds and hearts of our people' His smile returned 'And I think we've been successful Don't you?'

Burns had to admit that from the way in which everyone was running about searching for Stavros, including himself, they most certainly had Vassos was silent for a moment or two, his face thoughtful Then he looked at Eleni, his intense eyes seeming to probe deep into her mind She lowered her gaze, aware of what he was thinking He shifted his glance to Burns

'I'm very happy finally to meet you, Apollo,' he said 'I'd heard a lot about you, and it's been more than proven that you can be trusted' The deep lines on his face settled the selves into an expression of concern 'I won't be exaggerating,' he went on, 'when I say that I'm worried about Eleni There's talk of another take-over One more extreme than the present one Whatever liberties were given us will be taken away Since it is assumed that Stavros is alive, is it not logical and to be expected that his wife will be picked up? And what this new group have planned for her is something I do not wish to contemplate'

Burns was bewildered 'Let me get this straight,' he said slowly 'You're saying that Papadopoulos's government is in danger of being overthrown And from the right wing at that Is that it?'

Vassos nodded Burns looked over to Eleni who also nodded her head to confirm it 'I find that hard to believe,' he said

'My dear Apollo,' Vassos said 'At my age one learns not to speak of such serious things unless one has sufficient proof'

'Isn't there anything we can do to stop it?'

Vassos's chuckle was deep and yet despairing 'Stop it? How? Whom shall I warn? Who would believe me if I tried? No, my friend, all we can do is pray it won't succeed And if it does we prepare to fight back as we've always done'

A heavy silence weighed on them, dispelled at last by Vassos as he placed his arm about Eleni's shoulder affectionately 'But you, my dear,' he said, 'will do your fighting somewhere else I'm afraid that Greece is going to become less hospitable as far as you're concerned Mr Burns will take you away somewhere safer England perhaps' He withdrew his arm and looked at the two of them for a moment 'And now,' he said as a smile creased his face, 'I shall go into the kitchen and see if our lunch is ready' The door closed softly behind him and they were alone

Burns looked at Eleni, a sheepish grin on his face 'I feel like a punching bag,' he said

'Poor darling' She kissed him and shifted her chair closer to his 'All this time I knew how much you were suffering, and I couldn't tell you'

'Didn't you trust me?'

'At first, no Don't forget it was right after MacDonald's visit to you in New York that you took off for Athens How could we be sure you weren't doing a job for him? I was put on to you in order to keep you from finding out Stavros was really dead Because if you found out so would your friend MacDonald, and then the Greek government would know It was too big a risk'

Burns shook his head sadly 'Funny, isn't it? Here we both were, telling each other the truth, and neither one believing it'

'It's an occupational hazard'

After lunch they drove back down to the village of Kalambaka and checked into the Hotel Odission at the Meteora end of town. In return for getting his questions answered, Burns had a few put to him by Vassos. Such as would he join the struggle now that he had been drawn back into it, and if so how could he best be of help? Although he'd known this moment was inevitable, he'd kept postponing thinking about it seriously. Now he had to give his answer. They decided to spend the day in the village and return to the monastery in the morning.

At breakfast the porter brought them a note that had been left for them a few minutes before. It was from Vassos and was as abrupt and sharp as the sensation Burns felt in his stomach while reading it. 'We've been followed,' he informed Eleni as he crumpled the slip of paper in his fist.

Her eyes widened in surprise. Her first thought was Caldwell. 'But how could he?' she asked.

'It's not Caldwell,' he replied flatly. 'It's a couple of men who got in early this morning and started asking questions.'

'Who left the note?'

'The clerk at the hotel they checked into. He's obviously one of Vassos's men.' A frown creased his forehead. 'He also identified one of the men. It's Nikos Frangidakis.'

Eleni slammed down her coffee cup. 'Damn,' she snapped. 'That's a complication we don't need at this point.'

Burns smiled grimly. 'But it's a complication I welcome. There are a few loose ends I have to tie off with him too.'

10 SHOWDOWN

A DECISION on how to handle the problem was reached that afternoon. Nikos was obviously desperate, and while his thoughts were solely on finding the gold, he might put two and two together and connect Eleni's presence at the monastery with Stavros. In that case he became dangerous and had

to be stopped. They decided to use the gold as bait. Vassos had removed the cache shortly after Stavros's death, and what hadn't as yet been put to use was hidden in the monastery. He was amused at Burns's surprise that he knew its hiding-place. Stavros didn't want to be the only one who knew, so he told him where it was when Kilalis had died. And all the scrambling about by Nikos and Coco was for nothing.

With the plans settled, Burns and Eleni drove back to Kalambaka, and prepared to spend the rest of the day allowing themselves to be observed by Nikos. At nightfall they were to drive up to an unused convent near the monastery where they were to pretend to dig up the gold. Vassos and some men would be waiting there as a reception committee.

For the first hour of their leisurely stroll through the narrow winding streets of flat-roofed buildings, they caught no sight of either Nikos or the man with him. Although they stood out sharply among the local inhabitants, no curious stares came their way. It was as though everyone knew what they were doing, and were allowing them to do it in private. It was while watching an artisan working in front of his shop, that Burns caught sight of Tony across the street. There was something about the man that spelled out the fact that he was a tail.

'That's him,' Burns said. They casually strolled away from the shop, and walked on until they came to a general store where they purchased a pick, a shovel and a large canvas sack. All the while making certain that their tail was observing them from outside. Then, as though it were the most natural thing in the world to do, they carried their purchases through the streets to where their car was parked, and placed them in the trunk. That done, they went to a nearby taverna and ordered dinner. Tony sat at a corner table, his eyes riveted on a newspaper.

After dinner they walked back to their car and got in. In the side mirror Burns saw Tony get into a large black car about fifty feet behind theirs. Someone was behind the wheel waiting

for him Burns grinned 'They weren't taking any chances of losing us,' he said as he started the engine 'Now let's hope they don't stop to wonder how come we don't notice them tailing us on a lonely mountain road'

The rapidly darkening night encompassed them as they drove up to Meteora Burns felt the familiar tightness coil within him, and from her silence, knew it had communicated itself to Eleni Once the road levelled off it dipped slightly for a half mile until it came to a meadow protected by a ring of small hills In the centre they could make out the ghostly outlines of the deserted convent in the beam of their headlights Burns pulled the car into the shelter of a grove of towering cypress trees, and cut the engine From far off they heard the throbbing sound of Nikos's car Then it stopped

'They'll probably leave it down there and walk the rest of the way,' Burns said 'Give us time to do the dirty work, then jump us on the way out' He stared about the ruins 'I wonder where Vassos is' He shrugged, then opened the door of the car 'Let's go,' he said

Eleni followed him with a powerful flashlight in her hand while he opened the trunk and removed the pick, the shovel and the canvas sack The cold air was sharp on their flushed skins as they made their way through the heavy growth of gorse and bramble to the entrance Up close the old building loomed even more forbiddingly than when they'd first seen it Burns took Eleni's hand in his as they stepped over the crumbling stones and through an arched doorway They stood in what had once been the main hall, with strong shoots pushing their way through cracks in the mosaic floor Their flashlight picked out a pile of stones in the far corner

'There it is,' Burns said He handed the light to Eleni, and proceeded to load the sack with the stones When it was partially filled he twisted it closed and pulled it to the centre of the room

'Let's get out into the open,' Eleni whispered 'I don't like the idea of getting trapped in here'

Burns handed her one end of the sack, and gripped the other himself 'Now remember,' he cautioned, 'it's supposed to be filled with gold, so pretend it's heavy'

With Eleni holding the flashlight, and Burns the automatic, they dragged the sack towards the entrance. The moon shone eerily through the opening, throwing strangely distorted shadows in their path. Burns felt the tightness again. What if Vassos and his men weren't in position? How would he handle Nikos by himself? He slipped the safety off the automatic, and the sound echoed loudly. Then suddenly he was blinded. The bright beam of a flashlight hit him in the face causing him to drop his end of the sack. Bright circles of white light flashed on and off behind his closed lids.

Nikos's voice bounced off the walls, seeming to surround them. 'Throw your gun towards the light, Richard. We've got you covered.'

Burns shoved Eleni down behind the sack, and tossed his gun as directed. They could hear shuffling footsteps and muttered voices, and as the beam of light swung away from them, could see the dim outline of the two men less than a dozen yards away. Burns cursed himself for having been so sure that Nikos wouldn't follow them inside, searching about desperately for an idea how to get him out in the open where Vassos was.

'All I want is the gold, Richard,' Nikos was saying. 'If you behave sensibly neither one of you will get hurt. Now bring the sack over to me.'

Burns took it from Eleni's grasp, and started forward. He was stopped by Nikos's voice. 'No, not you. She can bring it over.'

'It's too heavy for her. Let your man come for it.'

'No.'

'I can manage,' Eleni whispered. Her eyes searched his for approval of what she was silently suggesting. He nodded his reply. With one hand clutching her flashlight, she grabbed the twisted end of the sack and slowly hauled it across the room to

where Nikos was waiting Burns watched her make her way, pretending the sack was heavier than it actually was. He was alert for the move he knew she would make.

Slowly she inched towards the circle of light until she was about ten feet from where Nikos stood. She stopped. 'I can't,' she panted. 'It's too heavy.'

Excited by the nearness of his goal Nikos covered the distance to her side in quick strides, and unthinkingly bent over the sack. A swift blur of movement and Eleni smashed her flashlight down on his wrist, knocking him to the ground. In the sudden darkness Burns lunged towards them. Before Nikos could recover his arm was twisted behind his back in a painful grip. A shot rang out and they could hear the whine of the bullet ricocheting off the walls. Then another followed closely.

'Get down,' Burns whispered hoarsely to Eleni. 'And for God's sake don't switch on your light.' Holding Nikos before him, he stumbled his way in the direction from where the shots had come.

'Hold your fire, Tony,' Nikos bellowed. With a sudden quick movement he fell forward and flipped Burns over his back. Burns hit hard, and as he rolled over, Nikos landed on him. Pinning him to the ground, he called out to Tony to get to Eleni and take her light. While the two men struggled together, Eleni silently slid along the floor to where she imagined Burns's gun had fallen when he'd tossed it over.

'I can't find her,' Tony screamed.

'Then get over to the door, and I'll pick up the sack,' Nikos shouted back. He broke away from Burns, got to his feet and stumbled about wildly in the pitch blackness like a blind bull until he fell over the sack. 'I got it,' he shouted, and as though on cue the entire place was suddenly bathed in bright light. From four directions wide beams of light pin-pointed the participants in the game of blind-man's-buff. Nikos stood like an animal at bay, clutching the sack and looking from one beam of light to the other as though trying to decide which one to charge.

Vassos's quiet voice sounded loud in the stillness 'Don't move,' he warned 'You're covered from all directions.' He ordered Tony to throw down his gun, then told both men to move towards the entrance Nikos, reluctant to let go of his prize, dragged the sack with him

Burns came alongside him as they got to the door. 'One minute, Nikos, he said as he took hold of the sack 'I want to show you what all the fuss was about' He turned the sack upside down and allowed the stones to pour out of it on to the floor Nikos stared at the pile unbelievably, then a bellow of fury burst from his throat as he dropped to his knees and hit his forehead against the mosaic floor over and over again in frustration and anger Strong arms lifted him to his feet and led him out into the courtyard In stolid silence he allowed himself to be taken back to the monastery The long night was over

11 IN THE NET

IN THE IG -VAULTE KITCHEN of the monastery, the small group gathered about the blazing fireplace Eleni, her face and arms streaked with dirt, was bathing the scratches on her legs with an antiseptic solution Burns and Vassos were sipping hot coffee laced with brandy, while Brother Elias, one of the monks who had helped capture Nikos, was tending the fire Slowly the warmth spread through the room and the bones of its occupants

'Will they be fed down there?' Eleni asked, breaking the silence

'There's only one way out from the lower floors,' Vassos explained. 'And that's through a long series of cells with one door to the upper levels That door is securely bolted We'll let them rest the night, and then . . '

'Then we'll decide what to do with them,' Burns finished for him

Vassos nodded 'And I must confess I don't know how to face that problem'

'Send him to Crete,' Eleni said without looking up. Both men stared at her questioningly

She stopped dabbing at her legs, and leaned back in her chair Her voice was harsh and tight as she spoke 'Nikos is a fool And like all fools he's dangerous Stavros told me of the night they went to hide the gold How Nikos came up with some reason to go to Athens when he found he wasn't to o along with them It wasn't possible to pin it on him, but it was always a mystery how the Germans knew about it and laid that ambush That was the reason they had to bury the gold instead of bringing it here'

Vassos's eyes clouded with the memory of that awful night 'Stavros had one fault,' he said 'He could never accept the possibility that any of his men could be a traitor. Yet then as now, men will betray a cause and their comrades for gold'

Eleni rose to her feet and walked over to the fire 'Send him to Crete,' she said firmly 'They are his people and they know how to deal with traitors'

'It will be sending him to his death,' Vassos whispered

'Is it better that he send us to ours?'

Burns went over to her and put his arm around her shoulders 'Let's sleep on it,' he said 'Tomorrow will be time enough to make a decision Now we ought to be getting back down to Kalambaka'

'It's much too late for you to be making that long drive,' Vassos interjected 'I invite you to spend the night as my guests' He smiled at Eleni's show of surprise 'I know such a thing is not usually done, but during the war and occupation many people hid here Women too We can consider this a time of emergency Brother Elias will bring cots and blankets and you can sleep here in the kitchen by the fire.' His eyes twinkled at them 'No one need know of the impropriety of it We'll hold Brother Elias to a vow of silence'

While waiting for the beds and blankets to be brought,

Eleni sat with Burns gazing thoughtfully into the fire, exhaustion beginning to fold over her. She was grateful for Vassos's broadmindedness.

Silence hung heavy over the monastery as Nikos and Tony lay in their prison below the main floor. Eleni and Burns, still in their clothes, slept under their rough woollen blankets beside the dying fire, while Vassos prayed for the guidance he felt he needed before sending two men to their deaths. Weary as he was, he slept fitfully. It was at the first dim glow of false dawn that the sound penetrated his sleep. He was instantly awake. A dull steady hum like that of a swarm of bees came to him from a distance. He sat up, alert, straining his ears and his memory. Then he knew, and the knowledge propelled him out of his cell and into the kitchen. He shook the sleeping Burns awake.

'Listen to that,' he whispered. Burns did so and a puzzled expression crossed his face.

'What is it?' he asked. Their voices woke Eleni and she too listened in bewilderment.

'It's the net,' Vassos told them. 'They're using the net to escape. We must stop them.' Grabbing a kerosene lamp, he led the way down a stairway into a winding corridor and down another stairway. Down into the depths of the monastery they ran, stopping at each floor to unbolt thick wooden doors. The hum grew louder.

'What did he mean by the net?' Burns asked Eleni as they ran.

As they came to the last level she explained about the nets that hung from the monasteries of Meteora. In the old days when there were no roads, visitors were drawn up from the valley in nets run by a hand windlass. Since the road was put in they were seldom used for anything other than the drawing up of supplies. 'We put in a small motor,' she told him, 'and bring in arms that way so that no one can see us using the road.'

Past a line of cells that were long unoccupied, they came to the one that served as Nikos's prison. The rotting wooden door had been smashed open. Vassos motioned them to follow as he ran to the end of the corridor which led into a round, high-ceilinged room cut out of the cliff itself. A large window was at the far side, and through it a thick rope was being paid out over the sill. It was being unwound from a coil driven by a single cylinder motor alongside. Vassos dashed to the window and looked out. Burns and Eleni joined him.

In the misty dimness rising up from the valley, the sight that met their eyes was a terrifying one. Halfway down the sheer cliff face swung the net at the end of the slowly moving rope, huddled together in terror, Nikos and Tony dangled hundreds of feet above the bottom, bouncing gently against the rocks as they inched downward. The hum of the motor filled the room.

'How do you throw that thing in reverse?' Burns asked.

'Come along, I'll show you,' Vassos replied as he moved over to the motor. 'But I doubt if we'll get them back.'

'Why?'

'Their weight is too much for the net. It has broken under less.' He cut the motor and the momentary silence was eerie. Then he threw it into reverse. As the hum started up, a piercing scream came from outside and drowned it out. Eleni turned away from the window.

'The net broke,' she said simply. The screams faded as the two men fell the rest of the almost thousand feet to the valley. Even when they stopped, Burns felt as though he could still hear them. The three stood silently as the rope coiled itself around the wheel at their feet. When the torn fragments of the net came up to the window level, Vassos switched off the motor.

'Tough way to go,' Burns muttered.

'All ways are tough,' Vassos replied. 'In this case it was better for us. The decision was taken out of our hands.'

12 THE CLEANSING OF APOLLO

BURNS HELD TIGHTLY to Eleni's arm as they crossed the airfield towards the waiting aircraft. They were silent, and had been just as silent earlier while walking the streets of Athens bidding the city goodbye. With hungry eyes they had devoured the buildings, the squares, the cafés and the people, committing them all to memory. For who could tell when they'd ever return? If they'd ever be permitted to return?

It had been late afternoon, the cafés filled to the usual bursting point with people deep in ardent conversation. The young and old, the worried and unconcerned, the credulous and the suspicious, all in open or secret exchange of opinions according to their views. It was the tight groups of students, huddled over their coffees, eyes intense, voices guarded, that caught and held the attention of Burns and Eleni as they walked by. They said nothing, their thoughts being identical. What was the future for these people? When would their destiny be in their own hands?

For a fleeting moment Burns thought he spotted Mino in the ever shifting mass of strollers, but quickly averted his eyes. This was no time to be seen together. He wondered if he would ever see his old friend again and under what circumstances. Especially if what Vassos had told him about the generals was true. An old saying about the ancient Greeks crossed his mind. . . something about them always living on politics and plain water. Was that to be the story again? He sighed, and Eleni squeezed his hand in understanding.

Now, as they crossed the tarmac towards their huge jet, he sighed again. This time it was Vassos in his monastery that was the cause. One man against all of this. But then everyone was just one man. If enough of them banded together. . . He didn't finish the thought. The sight of Caldwell a few yards ahead made him stop so abruptly that Eleni almost fell.

Standing alongside the ramp leading up to the plane, no loud multi-coloured shirt now, but oddly sombre in a dark business suit, Caldwell was watching their approach. Burns turned and looked into Eleni's worried eyes. 'It's all right,' he said in a low voice. 'He can't do a goddamned thing.'

They resumed their walk, slower now to signal their lack of concern at his presence. His greeting when they came up to him was as flat and colourless as his clothes.

'I don't like being made a fool of,' he said.

'And I didn't particularly like making one of you,' Burns replied steadily, meaning it. 'It was the circumstances.'

Caldwell studied them, looking from one to the other with searching eyes. 'So you're off to London, the two of you.' It was not a question, but rather a statement of fact.

'That's right.'

An awkward silence hung over them for a moment, then Caldwell permitted a wry smile to twist his lips as he directed his gaze to Eleni. 'I want to thank you for your recent hospitality. And in return I'm climbing off your backs.' He turned to Burns. 'Mac's reeled me in,' he explained.

'Your work finished here, Mr Caldwell?' Eleni inquired in a soft yet pointed tone.

'For the time being. And yours?'

'For the time being,' Burns answered for her.

'Smart move,' Caldwell said flatly. 'Let me drop you a little bit of advice, Burns. Stop playing the romantic freedom fighter. Englishmen can disappear on one of those penal islands same as Greeks can.'

Eleni slipped her hand from Burns's grip, and took step towards Caldwell. Her eyes were glittering with suppressed fury. 'This is a war, Mr Caldwell,' she said, her voice low and intense. 'By your standards it may be a small and unimportant one. But a big price is being paid for it by innocent people. This has been one small battle, but we expect bigger ones to follow. Perhaps you do too.' She paused and looked steadily at him for a moment before going on.

'It's true that I owe my life to you, but nevertheless we are enemies I don't trust the people you work for I'm sorry, but that's the way I feel'

She moved from in front of him and ran up the ramp to disappear inside the aeroplane The two men remained silent for a minute, then Caldwell thrust out his hand 'Well anyway,' he said haltingly, 'I wish you luck The two of you And I mean it'

Burns took his hand and gripped it 'Thanks I know you do' As he let go of his hand and started up the ramp, Caldwell's voice stopped him

'Burns'

He turned back to him from the first step and waited

'One question'

Burns knew what was coming, but said nothing

'Is Stavros alive or isn't he?'

Burns held his glance a long time before replying 'You ought to know better than to ask me that, Caldwell'

'I'm asking unofficially'

'Same thing' He began once more to mount the ramp, but a thought stopped him and he turned back to face Caldwell who was still looking after him

'I'll answer your question, Caldwell,' he said, his expression serious 'As long as there's a Greece, Stavros is alive'

Caldwell watched him walk up the ramp and enter the aeroplane He remained standing there while a few more passengers boarded, watched the door being closed and the ramp removed, then looked after the plane as it moved lumberingly towards its take-off point

Hands clenched into tight fists in the pockets of his coat, he strained his neck upwards staring after the aeroplane as it grew smaller and smaller in the rapidly darkening sky It wasn't until it was completely out of sight that he walked back across the field to the terminal, out through the crowded building and into a taxi that got him back to his hotel just as darkness settled over Athens

THE FEAR DEALERS

Robin Cade



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The Author

Robin Cade is the pseudonym of a highly successful historical novelist. *The Fear Dealers* is the first of a projected series of modern thrillers to come from his pen.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SUN dipped behind the mountains of Taiwan, it radiated reds and pinks and oranges, streaking across the blue of the sky itself. It would be a good night in Taipei and in the East China Sea.

The Pacific itself was calm, a measureless expanse of rippling dark blue, with only an occasional whitecap to disturb the placidity of the evening. And *Eastern Dream*. Two hundred miles east of the island the giant tanker, 500,000 tons of metal and machinery, cruised at twenty-five knots. A monumental dream from a designer's drawing board brought to life by the money and determination of World Oil—a ship so long it was an exhausting walk from quarter-deck to bow, so complex its bridge deck housed four huge computers, so complete in every detail its stewards were already shaking their cocktails in the officers' bar while the projectionist unpacked the last of his films. Tomorrow night, the final evening of the voyage, would be celebrated by the traditional dinner party given by Captain Maitland for his officers.

In the master's cabin, Hilary Maitland soaked in her hot tub, while in the first officer's cabin Joanne Clark powdered her nose. Their bathrooms were above each other; their personalities, judged by their before-dinner preparations, were similarly opposed. Hilary, especially when floating in a full tub with her hair piled on top of her head, gave a curious impression of looseness. She was a little below average height and inclined to be plump, yet she had thin legs, and her large breasts were attractively firm. But her green eyes, sliding to and fro over whatever they happened to be looking at, took everything in, stored everything away in her mind. And the mouth, like the eyes, was liquid, sliding from smile to pout.

to thin line and back to smile, all in a matter of seconds Her lips, slightly thick, added to the overall impression of sensuality But it was not a readily available sensuality, even to her husband At this moment she was concerned solely with cleanliness

Joanne, on the other hand, slender and firm-fleshed, ash-blonde, witty and exuding intelligence, as well as a certain coolness which could be disconcerting, was preparing for anything the night might bring, even the penultimate night of a ten-day voyage, when she had already flirted with every worthwhile officer on board

On the navigating bridge John Maitland paced slowly to and fro, hands firmly clasped behind his back He had appeared on the bridge at 1800 hours, as usual, and would leave at 1830 to dress for dinner As usual Maitland was a man of patterns, he had deliberately made himself so, over twenty years, perhaps because inside he possessed no real pattern at all

But to the crew the old man lived by the book This evening he wore, as usual, company regulation winter uniform, down to carefully buttoned blue jacket, although it was as warm as a hothouse on the bridge Only his cap was tilted at a slight angle No one else on board was allowed this privilege, the old man would be down on the culprit like a sack of sand But *his* cap was always raked, accentuating the slant to his sunburned features, fitting well above the surprisingly narrow shoulders which topped the tall, too-thin frame Although there was as yet little grey in his black hair, he looked his age, which was fifty-three

How he managed to keep his young, attractive second wife apparently contented provided a continual topic of conversation among the crew

'Course, Mr Large?' His Australian accent was flat and loud, cutting across the vast expanse of the bridge This deck was larger than the average dance floor, a silent expanse of machinery and mathematics, empty except for the radar

operator the quartermaster, the officer of the watch, and the captain

'I have zero three five, sir' Large was a very young second officer, and he perspired nervously when the captain was near

Maitland leaned over the chart table. Its hooded light cast a soft glow over the reams of stiff paper, reflected dimly from the dividers and parallel rule which lay there. The captain allowed his gaze to drift from the solidity of Taiwan north to the faint string of the Ryukyu Islands, and then above to where the main islands of Japan hovered at the top edge of the map.

'Zero three five seems correct, Mr Large.'

Slowly he extended the dividers, placed one point on the neat circled cross which marked the ship's position, extended the arm until the other point rested on Yokohama, and then transferred the opened dividers to the distance scale; it showed nine hundred miles. He glanced towards Large, who was sweeping the empty horizon with his binoculars. Maitland now measured the distance between his ship and Nagasaki, situated at the western end of the island of Kyushu, almost due north of their position, but separated from the circled cross by the string of the Ryukyus. This time the distance was six hundred miles.

He closed the dividers, straightened. 'She's your ship, Mr Large.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' But Large gave a hasty glance at his watch; the time was only 18 23. 'May I have a word, sir?'

Maitland, already turned to the door leading to the bridge wing, checked.

'Yes, Mr Large?'

Large came across the bridge slowly, sweat stood out on his forehead. 'The wing tanks, sir,' he said, dropping his voice so as not to be overheard by the quartermaster. 'There's an awful build-up of gas in there, sir.'

Maitland's head half turned. 'They should have been bled three days ago.'

'Yes, sir But Mr Clark'—Large licked his lips—'he said to leave them, sir'

Maitland raised his eyebrows 'Indeed? We'll be in Yokohama in thirty-six hours Why wasn't this reported before?'

'Well, sir, I thought Mr Clark was acting on instructions from you, sir'

'I see Leave it with me, Mr Large' Maitland stepped through the door on to the wing, closed it behind him The gentle breeze struck through the serge of his uniform, its chill, after the heat inside, induced a shiver He looked aft at the enormous red funnel rising above his head, and then forward at the endless hatch covers and pipelines and catwalks The bows of the ship, rising and falling gently in the Pacific swell, were so far away he might have been standing on the deck of a distant vessel His ship His accumulation of iron and machinery, filled with crude oil His, because he could drive her better than anyone else The thought gave him no pleasure any more

And now she was his weapon as well Did that thought give him any pleasure?

First Officer Clark appeared on the deck beside him Eddy Clark never moved, never scuffed a shoe or rustled a garment He always appeared And when his business was finished he disappeared He was not so tall as the captain, but far more powerfully built, which made his stealth the more disconcerting He had a long, thin, secretive face, sheltering behind his enormous hooked nose

'Christ,' he muttered 'I wish it was done'

'It will be, and just in time Large is getting suspicious Shall we say it again?' Maitland watched the bows rising and falling. 'You'll take the middle watch tonight What will you tell Clive Henry?'

Clark shrugged 'Last night out Christ, I *am* nervous And does it matter what I tell him?'

'Not really,' Maitland said 'And you'll alter course, three four seven, for three hours That'll clear the Ryukyus on the

inside. Then it's due north. I'll be with you at two, and we'll pull it then.'

First Officer Clark took out a large blue handkerchief and wiped his forehead, although the temperature was falling rapidly now the sun was gone. 'You're sure Jo will be all right?'

'Hilary doesn't make mistakes.'

'It's so damned distressing, keeping her in the dark like this. If Hilary knows, why not Jo?'

'Don't be a damned fool,' Maitland said. 'Jo? She'd have hysterics on the spot. Hilary is a part of it. When I told you this thing was planned down to the last detail, Eddy, I meant just that. It was planned three years ago.'

'Christ, it wasn't *just* business?'

'It wasn't just business,' Maitland agreed. 'But she'd put a knife through my ribs the moment she thought I wasn't going through with it.'

'But Jo, what about afterwards?'

'We'll get her off,' Maitland said.

'You mean you'll put the crew off as well?'

'That depends,' Maitland said. 'On the crew. And the Japanese.'

'Oh, Christ,' Clark said. 'The handkerchief was busy. Oh, Christ. But Jo.'

'We'll get her off,' Maitland said again. 'At the right time.'

'I meant her reaction, to the crew. To everything.'

'That's your problem, Eddy,' Maitland glanced at his watch, it was 18.30. 'I'm going to change for dinner now. Zero two hundred, Eddy.'

Clark licked his lips. 'What about *Northern Dream*? Isn't she due out of Yokohama about now?'

'Not until noon tomorrow. We're due to pass each other about twenty-one hundred tomorrow night. By then it won't matter if we do or don't, we'll be anchored in Nagasaki harbour. Zero two hundred. Mason will be quartermaster, Sanding will be in the shack, and you'll have Evans and Porter

available to help you And don't forget to report to London as usual at midnight I've worked out where we would be at that time if things were normal'

'Oh, sure,' Clark muttered 'You've worked everything out, John, I'm sure And you think we can run this ship with two stewards and a radio officer?'

'And four computers I could just about run *this* ship single-handed, Eddy'

He turned for the ladder, but Clark caught at his arm 'What about Christian? And Dawson?'

'Christian won't make any trouble If Dawson starts to bother about his turbines, we'll let Christian give him a sedative Quit bothering, Eddy Nothing can go wrong It has the power of the unexpected Of the unthinkable It is an event no one in the world, not even Bill Cronin, could ever imagine happening Until it's too late See you at dinner'

He went down the ladder, opened the bulkhead door, went along the softly lit carpeted corridor, and stepped into his cabin The door to the bedroom was tightly shut, and he had to knock to gain admittance His wife was the most vicious woman he had ever known, yet she was also the most self-consciously modest Now she hastily put away her powder puff and pulled on her blue and white kimono to hide her nakedness As if to add to the barriers she was erecting between his gaze and her body, she then loosed her hair, it brushed the tops of her thighs

She was a cold-blooded opponent of everything that was good, or even reasonable He had known that when he married her more than two years ago But by then he had already been deeply involved in the business of tonight, and he had not cared Marge had died, slowly and painfully, and he had watched her die Everything that had happened since, that would happen over the next twenty-four hours, or even after that—if he dared allow himself to look beyond that—was a direct result of his watching Marge die. If Hilary had to die, then it would be quickly And if *he* decided that she should

live, then she would live. This thought gave him immense pleasure. Incredibly, he was in love with her, in a way he had never loved Marge.

Eddy Clark was the one with a problem. Joanne really was a nice kid. But the nice kids had to be along as well. This had to seem the most normal of voyages.

'Darling' Hilary stood against him, and he stooped so that she could lock her arms around his neck. When he straightened, he lifted her from the deck. He kissed her on the mouth, was not abashed by the unusual tightness of her lips, licked them with his tongue, and then smiled and kissed her on the nose.

'Why so tense?'

'Is everything prepared?'

'As prepared as these things can ever be. Eddy Clark is terrified.'

She moved away, sat at her dressing table, and brushed her hair with short, anxious strokes, her back turned to him. But she watched him in the mirror. 'If Eddy makes a mistake, Johnny, you will have to kill him.'

Maitland took off his shirt as he walked towards the shower. He felt a pleasant glow spreading through his body. Tonight she was going to be his, and it was going to be a good night because of what would follow. She had a remarkable weakness for blood, for death, and the thought of death. The only time he had ever seen her really aroused had been at the cockfights in Bangkok. They had gone night after night, because on every one of those nights she had been *good* afterwards.

'I'll do it,' he said. 'If I have to.' He dropped his clothes to the deck, switched on the water, adjusted the temperature to his satisfaction. 'But it won't be necessary. Eddy won't let us down.' He smiled at her. 'Especially while Jo is on board.' He stepped into the shower, left the door open.

Hilary continued to brush her hair. 'And suppose *she* had to be killed?'

Maitland re-emerged, dripping and towelling. 'For Christ's

sake, sweetheart Nobody has to be killed, if everyone behaves in a reasonable manner'

Hilary put down the brush, cupped her chin, gazed into the mirror

'If she does have to be killed,' she said thoughtfully, 'I wish to do it It is something I have dreamed of for a long time Killing Jo Clark I really would like to do it Perhaps I shall do it anyway.'

Her desire to hurt was frightening, and fascinating Maitland put it down to her spell in prison Like most people connected with the world of drugs, she regarded herself as having been unjustly punished, and those months had built up inside her a fund of hatred for all things human which had made her always-strong sadistic streak her dominant characteristic

Tonight she frightened more than fascinated 'I wish to God you wouldn't talk that way' He threw the towel across a chair 'I'm nervous enough What am I doing? I mean, how would you describe it? Mutiny?'

'A captain cannot commit mutiny,' Hilary said

'That's my point' He walked across the room, unlocked his desk, took out the automatic pistol, tested the balance, then released the magazine and checked that it was fully loaded

'You are committing piracy,' she said

From the window of his office on a clear day Cronin could see the post office tower In February the clear days were few, but this afternoon he thought he could see the people on the observation platform This was bad It suggested a clear, cold night And the view from the upper floors of the World Oil building had long lost either significance or beauty Visitors allowed up this high might *ooh* and *aah*, and say, 'Oh, look, there's Buckingham Palace Can you see the flag?' or 'Isn't that Hyde Park Corner?' just to prove their intimate knowledge of London To Cronin, the whole damned thing was an

unnecessarily long journey by elevator One day the car would stick He hoped But not with him in it

He took out a pack of cigarettes, looked at it, and put it away again This was a daily ritual Come four o'clock he felt like a smoke But if he just looked at the pack, the urge went away again for a while Left him feeling like a cold beer instead, even on a February afternoon As Aya had learned by now, he hoped

He picked up the top letter on his desk, glanced at it, scrawled his signature At least she could type. He was mistrustful of new secretaries, required that they have their ability proved, and, despite belonging to the most international company in the world, he possessed a poorly suppressed streak of chauvinism as well But then, many people would have described Cronin as the perfect misanthrope He was a shade over six feet in height and had once possessed a powerful frame The muscles were still there, the shoulders still broad, but there was a distinct sag to the belly now, and he did not move with quite the old spring In his introspective moments, which were many, he considered this a shame, he was only forty-two But he had no intention of doing anything about it

He needed glasses, but was sufficiently vain to wear them only for reading, and his face wore a permanent frown, which made him appear at once worried *and* suspicious. This also was a shame, for his face had once matched his body, and he had been as popular in a dinner jacket as on the beach.

Bill Cronin looked on humanity these days with the air of a man whose car has broken down in the middle of a railway line when a whistle is blowing Perhaps he had his reasons There was that business of the Olympic team, so many, many years ago, for which he had been considered a certainty, but for which he had not actually been selected No doubt Cronin knew the reason, but he never discussed it

Then there was his marriage, which he didn't talk about either Cronin talked about very little His job, chief security

officer in World Oil, was a measure of his ability to be suspicious. He was young to hold such a position in the biggest oil company in the world. Most of his work was concerned with petty theft or subversive agitation, but he had proved his worth when someone had tried to sabotage one of the *Dreams* just before launching. His remaining two or three friends claimed that, whatever the money involved, the job was a mistake. Cronin was becoming more and more morose, more and more difficult to work with, every year. Few secretaries stayed longer than four weeks. Although Beryl had not quit, she had been taken rather seriously ill, with food poisoning, the doctor's certificate had said. She'd recover and be back, he hoped. Meanwhile, there was Aya.

Aya had been with him precisely four days, but she was interested enough still to learn quickly. She came in now, carrying a tray with a glass of beer and a pile of notes.

'Teatime,' she said cheerfully.

He didn't like her to speak, because her English was so perfect, so un-Oriental. When she was not speaking, she reminded him of Suiko, and thus he had been pleasantly surprised to see her four days ago sitting at Beryl's desk. Physically she was not the least like Suiko. Where Suiko had possessed a certain solidity, Aya was a midnight flower, with long black hair parted in the centre and then secured in a tight ponytail which lay down the middle of her back. Her face had not once, in the four days he had known her, changed expression. It was difficult to estimate the rest of her.

She placed the tray on his desk. 'These are all messages. The man in the wireless room grumbled. Why *do* you have to read all the messages, Mr Cronin?'

'I don't *have* to, Aya. I like to. The secret of running a security department is to know what's going on, all the time. And you can tell Mr Morton tomorrow, if you're here tomorrow, that he's been complaining long enough.'

Aya paused, her black eyebrows arched. 'Wo 't I be here tomorrow, Mr Cronin?'

'That's up to you' He glanced at the top message *Southern Dream*, snugly moored in Rio, timed ten forty-seven this morning, local time Which was actually only a few minutes ago *Southern Dream* was the one on which they had tried to plant a bomb Good old *Southern Dream*

'Isn't your beer cold?'

'My beer is delicious' He drank some of it, read the second message *Northern Dream*, a hundred miles east of the Ryukyus and making south Timed midnight plus twenty-five, local time That was also only a little over an hour ago in London But that wasn't right He flicked the pages of his diary *Northern Dream* wasn't supposed to leave Yokohama until tomorrow Trust Alex Brogan to be early, to make sure he was home at least one day ahead of schedule It really was remarkable that they ever managed to find a crew to sail with him

'Well then?' She seemed disturbed She stood there, hands resting on her hips It was ridiculous to compare this aggressive young woman with Suiko In some strange way all Japanese womanhood had become split down the centre, into Ayas and Suikos, the moderns and the traditionals

'Tell me,' he said 'Don't you freeze to death when you leave the building?'

She looked down and flushed Her hands hastily dug her blouse back into her skirt Odd, he had noticed her hands during the previous four days Like the rest of her, they were thin But like her hair, they were also magnificent

'I'm sorry, Mr Cronin As a matter of fact, I change into a pants suit before leaving the office I'd wear it to work if I thought Mr Michaelson would allow it But '

'He doesn't, and he never will, and there's the end of the matter Now, when I'm managing director,' Cronin said, drinking some more beer and leaning back in his chair, 'all of you will come to work in the nude' He read the third message *Eastern Dream*, a hundred miles east of the Ryukyus, making north for Yokohama Timed midnight and seventeen

minutes, local time Trust Johnny Maitland to be exactly on schedule

'What about all the men?' Aya asked

Cronin frowned at her 'What is your name?'

'I'm not with you, Mr Cronin '

'Your name I just can't place your name '

'Oh, my last name? Well, you see, you never asked My name is Nimura ' She waited Every sheet of World Oil stationery, including each of those in front of Cronin, carried the names of the four divisional general managers of the company, K Nimura headed the list

'Christ almighty ' Cronin stared at the message, *Eastern Dream* was the biggest ship in the world, or would be until *Western Dream* was launched According to the latest message from Nagasaki, *Western Dream* would be ready in about three months That would be an occasion *Eastern Dream's* launching had been an occasion It would mean a trip to Japan To Suiko? But she would have forgotten him by now

'I'm sorry, Mr Cronin I suppose I did get the job here because of Uncle Ken But since then I've tried my best '

'I'm sure you have Your Uncle Ken and I are the oldest of friends But he has kept your existence from me ' Cronin finished his beer 'Have you ever visited the Ryukyu Islands, Miss Nimura?'

'Oh, please go back to Aya, Mr Cronin No, I have never visited them '

'Well then, do you have a good imagination?'

'I think so '

'Then imagine the Ryukyus, and tell me what you see '

Aya closed her eyes Her eyelashes were the longest he had ever seen 'Palm trees,' she said 'Men in sarongs Or perhaps in nothing at all Diving for pearls?'

'I don't think so,' Cronin said 'And it's a bit cold for sarongs at this time of year '

'High-prowed rowing boats Long knives Turbans Girls with long hair and nothing on '

'You have a fixation,' he said 'I was talking about islands They're surrounded by water, you know'

'Oh Sparkling blue waves Perhaps a coral reef here and there Will that do?'

'Not quite You happen to be imagining them at midnight, and you're too far away to see land at all But the nights in that part of the world are generally pretty bright A hundred miles east of the Ryukyus I want you to imagine *Northern Dream* going south and *Eastern Dream* going north, by my reckoning Imagine, two of the greatest ships in the world passing each other at a distance of under five miles Doesn't happen every day Or every night'

Aya opened her eyes 'You love ships, don't you, Mr Cronin?'

'Ships,' Cronin said with great deliberation, 'are the only truly beautiful things in the world'

'I don't think I can agree with that'

'Flowers,' Cronin said with equal deliberation, 'are too fragile and too brief Sunsets are too unreal Clouds are too intangible And women get fat Even Japanese women, Aya' He frowned and picked up the messages again Zero plus seventeen, zero plus twenty-five Eight minutes Why, they must almost have jammed each other's radios.

He stared at Aya Nimura's belly 'And yet neither one reported the other,' he said 'Now why, Aya Nimura? Tell me why'

Cronin decided against going home to his apartment that night It was a very comfortable apartment, expensively situated in a Mayfair mews, and he could reach the park in a few minutes of brisk walking He often strolled down to the Serpentine on a Sunday morning in summer when he could not get down to Lymington for the weekend When he *could* do that, he preferred to sail. He shared the ownership of a six-ton sloop with Paul and Mary Efferton, who were as close to real friends as he possessed They tolerated his black moods, understood that he needed a few drinks to be even a reasonable

companion, and put up with the various odd young women he brought along to make up a foursome on a fine weekend

But this was February and they were in Lymington and the apartment was a very empty place. Sometimes. Tonight he felt restless. There were disturbing thoughts knocking about at the back of his brain, and not all of them were concerned with how two tankers with a combined displacement of over a million tons could pass within a few miles of each other and not see each other. Or at least not report each other, which was a direct contravention of company instructions.

He stayed at the office instead. He kept a bottle of Scotch in his bottom drawer for real emergencies. But even after four slowly sipped drinks, while he listened to the huge building slowly emptying, he was no happier. By now someone else should have come in to comment on those two irreconcilable messages. Except that he was the only senior member of the staff, so far as he knew, who read all the messages as they arrived. Michaelson wouldn't trouble with that lot until tomorrow morning. And by tomorrow morning, just supposing something was wrong—but what *could* be wrong? And anyway, there was a very simple way to find out. He finished his drink, picked up the telephone. 'Radio room.'

There was a series of deafening clicks.

'Winter.'

'Peter,' Cronin said. 'I'm glad it's you and not that idiot Morton. I'd like you to do something for me.'

'Will do.' Peter Winter conducted every conversation as if he were speaking to someone in Timbuktu on a poor line.

'I'd like you to call up *Eastern Dream* and ask her for a weather report on the Ryukyus when she passed them this afternoon. Last night, by her reckoning. I'd also like to know if she sighted any other ships.'

'Johnny Maitland doesn't like unnecessary calls.'

'You tell Maitland it's from me. And then do the same for *Northern Dream*. And let me have their replies.'

Winter sighed. 'Will do. Where do I reach you?'

Cronin hesitated. But he'd done his duty, acted like a good watchdog. He was entitled to allow some time for his personal problems.

'I'll be at Aya Nimura's flat for the next couple of hours,' he said finally. 'Ring me there.'

CHAPTER TWO

MAITLAND opened the cabin door, switched on the light. 'Time to get up, Mr Large.'

Large sat up, gazed at his captain in amazement. Maitland wore no jacket, the top button of his shirt was open, and his cap was more rakishly tilted than ever. 'Something wrong, sir?'

Maitland moved the pistol to and fro and Large's eyes bugged. 'Up. Get dressed.'

'Yes. Yes, of course.' Large tore off his green spotted pyjamas, dragged on his shorts. 'Trouble among the crew?'

'You could say that, Mr Large. I'm putting you under arrest.'

Large, reaching for his shirt, turned very slowly. 'Sir?'

'You heard me, Mr Large. I've arrested all the crew save six. Henry and Dawson and Dr Christian are already under restraint. You're the last.'

Large's face assumed an expression of incredulity. He sat down on his bunk and scratched the back of his head. 'Some sort of a joke, Captain Maitland?'

'No joke,' Maitland said. 'Get on with it. Out there.' Once again he waved the pistol.

'But, you can't be serious, Captain. I mean . . .' Large scratched his head again. 'You must be mad.'

'Everybody's mad,' Maitland agreed. 'Some just more than others.'

Large frowned at him. 'Have you arrested Mr Clark?'

'No. Mr Clark shares my opinion of the rest of you.'

'Mad,' Large muttered and moved. His left arm came up and he struck Maitland under the right forearm, driving upward. Large himself followed, his right arm swinging, his big fist bunched. Maitland ducked, and the blow merely threw him against the bulkhead.

Large stood above him panting. 'Now,' he said, 'give me the gun, Captain Maitland. Just give me the gun. Then we'll go and talk with Mr Clark.'

Maitland, slumped against the washbasin, was also breathing hard. He still held the pistol. His finger was showing white where it curled around the trigger. And now the gun itself slowly came up. Large stared at his captain in utter horror. Perhaps he had never seen such an expression on anyone's face before, a combination of desire and fear. But the pistol was still moving, coming into line with the second officer's body, and the knuckle was whitening.

Large lurched for the door. He wrenched it open and reached the corridor. He stumbled out, fell against the far wall, and regained his balance. He moved up the corridor, checked, and looked over his shoulder. Maitland had also come out of the cabin, and he stood there, legs spread, the pistol held in both hands as he raised it.

'Oh, God,' Large gasped. 'Oh, God.' He ran, moving from side to side, bumping against the bulkheads, checked at the foot of the staircase leading upward. Hilary Maitland wore her white and blue kimono. 'Oh, God,' Large gasped. 'Mrs Maitland. Hilary. Your husband. He's gone berserk.'

Hilary looked past the terrified man at Maitland, her hands deep in the pockets of her kimono.

'Well?' she demanded.

Maitland stood there, the pistol swaying. Then he half fell against the bulkhead.

Large turned to face his captain. 'Thank God,' he whispered. 'Oh, thank God, Mrs Maitland, thank God you came out. What can have happened?' He took a step towards Maitland, and his hands slid around the back of his thighs. He fell

to his knees on the soft carpet, hands still locked to his naked back 'Oh, God,' he whispered, 'Oh, God'

Hilary Maitland withdrew the long slender knife, now dripping red on to the beige of the carpet She threw it towards her husband 'Pick it up,' she said, her voice as soft as ever, her hands disappearing into her pockets

Maitland moved as if in a trance The hand holding the pistol now hung at his side, the gun barrel pointing at the deck He staggered up the corridor as if *he* was the wounded man, gazing at Large, who was slowly inclining forwards, still gasping for breath

'He won't die,' Hilary said 'Not for a while at least'

Maitland stood above the knife 'It wasn't necessary,' he said 'Christ, I told you that, Hilary. Where was he running to? Porter is out there with the rifle'

'These men have to follow you without question,' Hilary said softly 'So maybe they look on you as a hero They have to know that you can also be the devil They have to be more frightened of you than of anything else on earth, Johnny'

Maitland gazed at Large The second officer's head had touched the carpet, but now he raised it again, while the blood dribbled out of each leg of his pants and gathered between his bare feet 'Oh, God,' Large whispered 'No, Captain You're mad She's mad You're all mad'

'You'll have to finish it,' Hilary said

'Oh, God,' Large whispered 'Oh, God Call Dr Christian, Captain Maitland Please I'm bleeding to death'

Maitland stepped forward, and with a quick anxious movement, his right hand swinging as it drove the knife forward, he slammed the thin blood-red blade into the helpless chest, then swung back again while blood spurted across the white bulkheads of the corridor Large's arms left his back and curled around his captain's knees His head drooped between Maitland's legs and he hung there, as if performing some obscene ritual But then perhaps death is an obscene ritual

'Keep the knife,' Hilary commanded and moved up the

corridor to open the door to the deck 'Porter,' she said, 'come in here quickly The captain has had trouble with Mr Large'

Porter, large, red-faced, sweating with tension, stepped inside with his rifle, which he carried with cautious unfamiliarity 'My God,' he said 'You all right, Captain Maitland?'

Maitland gazed into his wife's eyes, being willed to speak, not to vomit

'No,' Hilary Maitland said 'I think he may be hurt'

Porter started forward, and Maitland shook his head 'I'm all right' How clear, how loud, how brisk his voice 'Took me by surprise, that's all I just never expected Large to act that way'

'And you killed him,' Porter said admiringly 'By God, sir, you have what it takes'

First Officer Clark appeared through the doorway from the deck 'Large?' he said

'He went for me,' Maitland said quietly

'And you killed him?' Clark demanded 'With a knife? You said there'd be no bloodshed'

Maitland straightened 'I said there'd been no *need* for bloodshed, Mr Clark But by God, I'll kill any man who crosses me from here on in Understand *that*, Mr Clark'

He climbed the stairs behind his wife Clark gazed at Large for a moment and then scrambled up behind his captain Gone was his habitual stealth Now he almost fell across each step

'What about that call from London? Why should they check our weather? They've never done that before'

'I imagine it has something to do with Billy Cronin,' Maitland said 'He's probably drunk and can't think of anything better to do Why don't you have a drink, too, Eddy, and relax It's all done The ship is ours'

'Oh, Christ,' Clark said. 'Oh, Christ Have you seen Jo? She's lying there, hardly breathing'

Hilary Maitland opened her bedroom door 'That's the drug, Eddy There's nothing the matter with Jo She'll wake up chirpy as a bird'

'But when she does,' Clark wailed 'Oh, God, when she does '

'You'd better be there,' Maitland said 'Because if she makes trouble she goes down with the crew Right down in the hole '

'Like hell,' Clark said 'I've been down there You wouldn't put Jo with the men, Johnny '

'Jo is your business,' Maitland said 'Now get Large's body over the side, and in half an hour be in the engine room with Evans and Porter I want those charges fixed by dawn I'll see you there Half an hour, Eddy '

He closed the door behind him Hilary was in the bathroom washing her hands He stood beside her at the basin, watched the red water draining out

'You're upset about that boy '

Maitland soaped, slowly and deliberately 'Of course I'm upset about Harry Silly fool But I had to do it Didn't I?'

'Of course you did sweetheart Really, you have to do it to all of them. Listen to me That was what Kanauchi intended from the beginning I did not tell you this before, John But Kanauchi is sure it would be a mistake to let anyone leave the ship Anyone, John Save you '

'And you, Hilary?'

'You know my part, John You knew it when we started the voyage '

Maitland dried his hands 'I never really expected you to go through with it '

Hilary Maitland shrugged 'I want to hunt them That is all Kanauchi says, you say, that having to pay all that money will hurt them more than anything But I do not believe that Money is only money They will earn it back quickly—World Oil by putting up their prices, and the government by putting up their taxes I would like it to happen '

'Even if you have to die yourself,' Maitland said, half to himself

Cronin got Aya's address from the switchboard girl and hung up He found a taxi after walking two blocks, sat back, and

breathed deeply, rolling down the window to let the chill February air cut into his cheeks. Four whiskies before dinner were doing him no good at all.

He paid off the taxi at Queen's Gate and walked the rest of the way. He wanted to be sober. Now why? He wasn't likely to get anywhere with Aya Nimura first time around. Even supposing he wanted to. No, tonight was going to be one of his bad ones. Because there was something wrong. The conviction was growing with every second, no matter how illogical it all was. Something which involved either Johnny Maitland or Alex Brogan, and they were both friends of his. And he couldn't think what it was.

He climbed the stairs slowly, rang the bell, studied the name cards, and felt his heart drop. Nimura and Waters. Oh, Christ almighty. Of course, a girl like Aya would be living with some energetic young man. Old Cronin had fouled up again.

'Well, hello,' Aya Nimura said from behind him.

Cronin turned slowly. 'You'll be billed for my coffin,' he said. 'I shall make a note of it in my will.'

The smell of newspapers was hidden beneath the stench of fried fish and chips supported by salt and vinegar. She held the bunched paper in both hands, and judging from the grease around her lips had not been able to contain her hunger until she got home.

'Just a bite of supper,' she said. 'I often nip out for fish and chips when I'm on my own.'

Cronin's heart climbed so rapidly from his belly back to his chest he felt physically ill. 'I'm just glad you got back,' he said. 'I was getting tired of this wallpaper. Would you like to drop those in the garbage can and have a bite with me?'

Aya Nimura put her head on one side and then shook it slowly. 'Never eat with the boss, they say. That way is the top of a slippery slope.'

'I can see you're going to be difficult,' he said. 'Well, then, will you offer me a drink?'

'It'll have to be vodka. Would you like to open the door?'

'What do you recommend I use?'

'The key, Mr Cronin. It's in the pocket of my slacks.'

She was wearing jeans and boots and a heavy sweater, all crimson. Now she waggled her right thigh. 'This one.'

'And I don't even get my face slapped.' He slipped his hand into her pocket, felt the texture.

'It's the only thing in there,' she pointed out. But she was smiling, showing small even teeth. Her face was only inches away from his and she was breathing fish at him.

Patience, Billy boy. Patience. Grab at this one and she will disappear like a cake of wet soap.

'I don't agree with you at all,' he said and removed the key. Inside the apartment the telephone was ringing. 'It's for me,' he said, and left the door open behind him. 'Yes?'

'That you, Bill? Peter here. Those messages of yours *Eastern Dream* reports weather as heavy rain, squally showers, and poor visibility. *Northern Dream*, oddly enough, reports a clear night, with excellent visibility.'

He paused. But he hadn't finished. Although he had done a very good job on Cronin's evening.

'So?'

'Well, seeing as you're interested—and it is odd, isn't it?—I got a weather report from our Tokyo office. It is a fine clear night in the Ryukyus, with excellent visibility.'

Again he paused, but Cronin did not say anything.

'Are you still there, Bill?'

'Yes.' Cronin watched Aya Nimura sit down in the easy chair, the only one in the room, and pop a chip into her mouth. She gazed at him as she chewed.

'It is odd, isn't it?' Winter asked.

'Yes,' Cronin said. 'Let me brood for a few minutes. I'll call you back.'

He replaced the receiver.

'I suppose you had some reason for coming all the way up here, Mr Cronin?' Aya carefully masticated a chip. 'Apart from the use of my telephone.'

'I told you, I was thinking of dinner company I haven't eaten'

'Oh, I am sorry' She looked down at the paper on her lap 'Have a chip There are some left, and I don't really go all that much for potatoes'

'Thanks very much'

'And I can boil you an egg,' she said brightly 'I can boil you two eggs'

'That would be lovely,' Cronin said 'There was also some talk about vodka'

'Oh, yes I think there's half a bottle left Sit down, Mr Cronin' She vacated the chair and Cronin sat in it The vinegared newspaper was placed in his lap, and Aya sucked her fingers before hurrying across to a scratched liquor cabinet She knelt 'Just under half a bottle With orange?'

Cronin nibbled a chip 'Sounds delicious' He decided that he couldn't actually describe the room as empty, because apart from the easy chair there were three overstuffed hassocks, the floor was bare wood, except for a large thick mat over by the wall But in addition to the scarred liquor cabinet there was a low table with a cassette recorder Definitely a lively crowd here

There was also a gas fire, turned low, but still providing a pleasant amount of background heat And he was alone with a girl who could definitely be described as attractive, if not beautiful And he was full of whisky and would soon be full of vodka Was a strayed tanker about 10,000 miles away all that important? The *Dreams* had always turned up before

But then, none of them had even gone astray before

Aya poured, added orange, gave him the glass 'Now for the eggs'

The kitchenette was through a doorway on the right By half turning he could watch her fussing over a gas ring None of her movements had any suggestion of familiarity with her surroundings

'Do a lot of cooking?' he asked

She laughed. It was half a giggle but peculiarly attractive.

'Lucy does the cooking.'

'Lucy being whom?'

'Lucy Waters, my room-mate. Ouch.' She had apparently burned her fingers.

Cronin suddenly smiled. 'And where is this *cordon bleu* dream tonight?'

'Out on a date. She won't be back before midnight.'

'And you aren't a cook? I thought Japanese girls were let's say good at everything domestic.'

'Most of them are. I had the misfortune to be educated in England.' Aya leaned in the doorway, arms folded, gazing at him. 'Why *did* you come here tonight, Mr Cronin? The other girls all told me you like to look, but you never touch.'

'Admirably put.' Cronin finished the chips, rolled the newspaper into a ball, and followed her example by licking his fingers. 'It did occur to me that you are well worth looking at.'

'Thank you, sir.' She bowed and retreated into the kitchen, reappearing a moment later with two eggs in a saucer and a tarnished teaspoon. 'There we are.' She sat on one of the hassocks. 'Smoke.'

'I've given them up.'

'Then I hope you won't mind if I do.' She lit a cigarette, inhaled, leaned her back against the wall, legs crossed. Her hair lay across her right shoulder. 'Looking must get awfully boring.'

'Is that an invitation?'

'It's a conversational gambit, Mr Cronin.'

'Aya, in many ways you are far too intelligent to be merely a secretary. Would you like to be my mistress?'

If he had hoped to ruffle that too confident exterior, he was disappointed.

'Most things in life are negotiable, Mr Cronin.'

Cronin swallowed half an egg. 'Don't disappoint me, Aya.'

'I won't, if you won't misunderstand me, Mr Cronin. I'm interested in people. I'm very interested in you, which is one

of the reasons I volunteered to replace Beryl And I like the truth Why *did* you come here tonight? For a screw?’

It occurred to Cronin that he had been completely outplayed He finished the second egg, washed it down with vodka ‘I don’t think so I am a man with various problems’

‘And you felt like a shoulder to cry on Don’t disappoint *me*, Mr Cronin’

It was time to retreat, in the best possible order ‘You didn’t let me finish When my problems become acute, I become restless We both have a problem now, seeing that you work for me It’s to do with the Ryukyu Islands’

‘Oh, those two ships’ Aya shrugged ‘Couldn’t they have just missed each other?’

‘Dear girl, when walking down the embankment have you ever just missed Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster? And to get a proper idea of what *they* missed you’d have to throw in Westminster Abbey as well And anyway, their positions indicate that they passed within five miles of each other, radar range on *Eastern Dream* must be something like forty miles, and *Northern Dream* would be an awfully big blip’

Aya frowned ‘I see what you mean You think one of them gave an incorrect position?’

‘Ships like ours don’t give incorrect positions, darling At least not by accident Their computers won’t let them One of them wasn’t there’

‘How very odd Which one?’

‘*Eastern Dream* Her weather report doesn’t tie in with the one we obtained from our Tokyo office’ He finished his vodka ‘So, Aya Nimura, tell me what would cause *Eastern Dream* not to be a hundred miles east of the Ryukyus when she should be, and yet report that she is’

‘Mutiny,’ Aya said

Cronin sat up very slowly ‘The crews of five-hundred-thousand-ton tankers do not mutiny, Aya Each man on board is a highly paid professional technician’

'Okay,' Aya said 'You tell me'

'Mutiny,' Cronin muttered 'It just isn't possible John Maitland's crew mutinying? I mean, what could they gain?'

'It either has to be mutiny,' Aya pointed out, 'or all their computers have gone on the blink Which of those two is the more likely?'

Cronin picked up the telephone and dialled 'Rhoda? Give me Mr Winter again' He held the receiver away from his ear to give her room to click 'Pete? I want you to put through a personal call from me to John Maitland No substitutes I want to talk with the man himself.'

'Will do You realize it's about four o'clock in the morning out there?'

'Put me through, Peter And call me back'

'Don't tell me You'll be at Aya Nimura's flat'

'Well, I may as well stay here until I get through.'

'Will do,' Winter said and hung up

'I shall, of course, charge all these telephone calls to the company,' Aya said

'Be my guest' He returned to the armchair, gazed at her Nothing to do but wait 'Let us forget *that* problem for the time being'

'You have another?'

'Oh, indeed You will probably discover that I am impotent'

'Will I? When do I discover that you are drunk?'

'I thought you already had. When I am drunk, I become impotent And when I am worried, I get drunk'

'And you are always worried, so it's a chain reaction,' Aya said 'Is that why your wife left you?'

'Correction,' Cronin said 'I left my wife'

'May I ask why?'

'Oh, partly because of my problem, certainly, but mostly because she slept around' He held up his hand 'Don't get me wrong I can claim to be as amoral as everyone is supposed to be in this day and age Harriet was, is, I should think, an

extremely good-looking, extremely sophisticated, extremely wealthy young woman. Swinging parties were fun, in the beginning. But then it started to get to me.'

'And you left her?' Aya uncrossed her legs and got up. 'Let me get you another drink.'

'Do you aim to keep me this way?'

Aya did not reply, but her mouth slid into a half smile, she picked up his glass, and carried it to the liquor cabinet.

'Believe me,' Cronin said. 'I was thinking of both of us. Too much humility can be bad.'

'This is the craziest conversation, or at least the craziest proposition I have ever received,' she said. 'Don't you think it is possible that your attraction is based upon my being Asiatic? And specifically Japanese? A lot of European men have some very strange ideas about Japanese women.'

'Not so very strange,' Cronin said. 'Optimistic. They think of Japanese women as women, if you follow me. But it also happens that Tokyo is one of my favourite cities. Your uncle is one of my favourite people. So, your being Japanese undoubtedly has a lot to do with my being here telling you my troubles. A lot. But not all.'

'Mr Cronin,' she said and hesitated. He had the oddest feeling that she was about to make some sort of confession. Then she sighed. 'If I didn't like you I wouldn't be working for you, I guess. Will you tell me about yourself? Everything?'

Cronin realized that for the third time in his life he was being taken over by a woman without quite knowing how it was happening. Perhaps that was what he had really valued about Suiko - no take-over bids. But it was surely necessary to fight this one, however much he wanted the girl.

'If that's what turns you on. But I'd like us both to be sure.'

'I've just said I'll go to bed with you, Mr Cronin,' Aya said. 'and you start talking about being sure. Okay. You tell me what you want me to do.'

'I'd like you to undress,' Cronin said.

Without saying a word, she stood with her back to him and

took off her crimson sweater and stepped out of her boots. She did not, after all, wear a bra. She did not need one. Her breasts were scarcely perceptible, the smallest of mounds, but she had nipples, large and distended. Maybe it was the cold. 'Tell me,' she said, unzipping her pants. 'You really do have a reputation as a drunk, Mr Cronin. Yet you hold down a very responsible job. How?'

'Did anyone ever tell you that you are beautiful, Aya?'

'Yes,' she said and sat down, crossing her legs.

'Oh, don't do that,' he begged.

'Sorry.' She uncrossed them again. Her belly was no rounder than her breasts, and it slid away into matchingly slender thighs, between which was a splendid but surprisingly narrow growth of curling black hair. 'Would you like me to put my boots back on?'

'Kinks I don't need.' Cronin undressed. For the first time since four o'clock that afternoon John Maitland was off his mind.

'You were going to tell me about the job, Mr Cronin.' Her eyes had become opaque, suddenly losing their sparkle. But she still smiled.

'Michaelson believes in employing the best men for the jobs he has in mind. He employs me because I keep things running the way he wants them to run. How much I drink and who I sleep with doesn't interest him in the least, so long as it doesn't interfere with the job.'

'So Mr Michaelson will employ you, no matter what, as long as World Oil remains secure.'

'That is correct. Just as he will continue to employ your uncle as head of the Far Eastern division because he is the best divisional manager he has. And he will also continue to employ John Maitland as his senior captain, although Maitland came up from the lower deck and has blotted his copy-book by marrying someone from the wrong side of the social register. Because Maitland is just about the best seaman in the world.'

Suddenly the telephone was ringing Cronin leaped across the room 'Cronin'

'Here's your call,' Winter said 'Go ahead, *Eastern Dream* Over'

'Maitland here What the hell do you want, Bill? Don't you realize it's four o'clock in the morning? Over'

There could be no question that it was Maitland And yet, it wasn't Maitland There was a strain in this voice Cronin could never remember having heard before in this most confident and competent of men And he had once spoken with Johnny Maitland in the middle of a hurricane

'I just wanted to hear your voice, old chum,' he said 'And it sounds good Say I had a nightmare about you Over'

'Jesus,' Maitland said, regardless of the fact that his voice was travelling 10,000 miles and open to eavesdroppers throughout that distance 'Are you drunk, Bill? Over'

'Of course,' Cronin agreed 'It's eight o'clock in the evening here, you know I hear you're having thick weather in your part of the world Over'

'Was it you looking for that met report earlier too?' Maitland asked 'It's clearing Just a rainstorm Over'

'Yeah Glad you managed to miss *Northern Dream* Over' There was a pause

'What's that?' Maitland asked 'Over'

'She passed you just after midnight,' Cronin said 'Couldn't have been more than ten miles away Oh, don't worry, she didn't bother to report you either Must have been the rain But I'd have your electronics boys check your radar It's either blinking or your operator was asleep on the job Over'

Another pause

'I'll do that,' Maitland said, speaking very slowly 'Maybe the rain was heavy enough to black out communications It certainly was coming down What the hell was *Northern Dream* doing off the Ryukyus at midnight? Over'

'You know Alex Brogan He'll be early for his own funeral Over.'

'Yeah,' Maitland said 'I guess he will Listen, Bill I'll give you a call sometime tomorrow and discuss the whole thing then The fact is, what with this rain and the poor visibility, and now the radar being on the blink, we're having some navigational problems By tomorrow morning we'll have sorted it out I'll call you then Over '

'Do that,' Cronin agreed 'Give my regards to Hilary and the Clarks Over '

'When they wake up,' Maitland said 'Over '

'And to Harry Large and the boys Over '

Another short pause

'Yeah,' Maitland said 'I'll do that, Billy boy *Eastern Dream* over and out '

Cronin still held the receiver in his hand He gazed at Aya Nimura She was a beautiful young woman Youthfully beautiful in every way And she was frowning 'You do bring your troubles on yourself, Mr Cronin What's a misplaced tanker here and there? Anyway, surely you can stop worrying You can't have a mutiny and still have a captain, can you?'

For the moment Cronin ignored her and pounded the receiver 'Rhoda? Wake up, girl '

'Yes, Mr Cronin '

'Get me Mr Michaelson '

Hesitation

'Are you sure, Mr Cronin? Mr Michaelson has gone out to dinner, and he left instructions that he was not to be called except in the event of a declaration of war or the loss of one of the *Dreams* '

'You find him, Rhoda, and get him on the line Call me back here No I'll be at the office '

He looked up Aya Nimura had left her hassock and was standing in front of him. Now she put her arms around his neck 'After all that, I suppose I had better get dressed '

CHAPTER THREE

MAITLAND said, 'We'll keep that conversation to ourselves, Mr Sanding'

'Yes, sir,' Sanding said 'But if'

'Brogan leaving early was bad luck, that's all But it can't affect us now Just believe that I just don't want the others worrying needlessly Understand me?'

'Aye-aye, sir,' Sanding said He picked up the earphones again What did he think of the situation? That for stealing World Oil's flagship he was being paid a quarter of a million dollars? Sanding had grown to trust his captain over the years, over a succession of situations which only Maitland could have handled The same went for Porter and Mason and Evans And even Eddy Clark

Maitland made his way to the navigation bridge Mason was on the helm, and *Eastern Dream* continued to streak northward through the calmest of seas The night was so clear it was possible to make out dark humps on the eastern horizon, the last of the Ryukyus It had been off these very islands that his submarine had been forced to the surface and made to surrender, Maitland recalled How many years ago?

He opened the door to the wheelhouse, and Mason turned his head

'Everything all right, Mr Mason?'

'Aye-aye, sir An important call?'

'Just routine, Mr Mason You'll be relieved in an hour.'

'Everything going well below, sir?'

'It's going fine, Mr Mason' Maitland turned away

'And then we'll be a floating bomb, eh, Captain?' Mason asked

'Why yes, Mr Mason But a bomb which will only explode if and when we say so'

Mason was less confident than Sanding He was older

Maitland went down the ladder to the officers' accommodation deck. Here even the noise of the turbines was muted, and the carpet deadened the slap of his shoes. This deck was dead. As it should be. There was no one here except for Jo Clark, and she was deep in a drugged sleep. There'd be noise enough when she awoke. He must try to keep Hilary away from her.

So what did he feel at this moment? What did he feel about Harry Large? Remarkably, not a thing. Perhaps Harry's death had been necessary, it eliminated any possibility that he might change his mind at the last moment. Certainly Hilary thought that.

But to think about Hilary, or indeed about Harry, too deeply would be to drive himself around the bend.

He stepped outside to the boat deck for a moment, gazed at the empty sea, a sudden thrill of fear running up and down his spine. It was just possible that Billy Cronin had managed to work out exactly how things stood and had managed to get some action out of Alistair Michaelson. Maitland had the highest possible respect for Cronin. In some ways he was even a little afraid of him. And jealous of him, certainly. Now why? As skipper of *Eastern Dream* he earned more in a quarter than Cronin earned in a year. He was—he had been until last night—the most important ship's captain in the merchant world, without exception. Cronin was little more than a private detective.

Maitland went inside and below, through the eerily deserted crew's mess, stopped to listen. Now the roar of the turbines was close beneath his feet, pushing *Eastern Dream* northward at close to her maximum speed, but even so it was certain there was no noise coming from the storeroom. There were thirty-five men in there, but they were still too stunned by what had happened to make a concerted protest. He went down the next ladder.

Did eleven years make that much difference? Cronin in time would be fifty-three as well. And at fifty-three he'd be a wreck, whereas Maitland could even now pass for the late

thirties Nor was Cronin ever a happy man at any time, judging by the gossip Yet there was something about Cronin. They were friends, officially They greeted each other like brothers and enjoyed getting drunk together But Maitland loathed the man because he was not quite human There was the truth of the matter Bill Cronin treated life like a dog, and life had never really got up and kicked him in the face

Heat welled around Maitland and the power which filled the air seemed to fill his every vein He stood in the control room and looked down at the humming machinery, gleaming clean, more like an electricity-generating plant than the traditional picture of a ship's engine room Working flat out, driving *Eastern Dream* north, for Nagasaki

And, below even the engine room, his partners were also working flat out, and wondering what had happened to their captain. He began his descent of the myriad ladders, his negotiation of the endless catwalks

Maitland remembered that when the incredible idea had first been put forward to him in Bangkok, his first thought had been of Cronin Of course he had been drunk. He had been drunk the entire three weeks after Marge had died, and for two of those weeks his only company had been Kanauchi and Hilary He had no recollection of how they had first met him How they had picked him up Of course now he knew that they must have been watching him, summing him up, for weeks before

And yet his first thought had been of Cronin

After which, becoming sober and perhaps realizing the enormity of what he had become involved in, he continued to fear the man, for all the confidence he pretended to Eddy Clark and the others He came upon Clark now, waiting in the lower compartment that housed the auxiliary machinery, kneeling beside the huge coil of wire, sweating, fanning himself with his cap

'Where's Hilary?'

'She's gone down to supervise I never knew she was an explosives expert'

'The word is just expert' Maitland made for the last ladder
'Who was the call?' Clark wanted to know

'London,' Maitland answered carelessly 'Just to inform us that *Northern Dream* is leaving Yokohama early, so we won't be surprised when she turns up on our bow. Sanding felt I should know'

'Oh, Christ,' Clark said 'But if she's leaving early'

'Relax, Eddy So we won't signal each other By the time they get around to working out why, we'll be in Nagasaki'

He went down the ladder into the lowest compartment. Here he was thirty feet below the waterline, and he seemed to have all the noise and all the power in the world sitting right on top of him He was on a level with the screw, and the huge shaft hurtled around and around only feet behind him Here Porter waited, sitting on the trembling steel deck, an empty box beside him He looked like a devil tired out with a long day in hell, his shirt stuck to his shoulders and his face gleamed red in the brilliant white light

'What is going on?' Maitland demanded

'She wouldn't wait, Captain Maitland, sir,' Porter said
'She insisted on taking it up herself Evans has gone with her'

The bulkhead door into the skin of the ship stood open, but there was no sound from in there, all was obliterated by the rushing of water past the hull Maitland picked up the spare flashlight, stepped into the narrow space, made his way forward through the huge steel girders Immediately forward of the engine room were the fuel oil bunkers, now only half full, and then the permanent ballast tanks separating the working part of the ship from the cargo tanks, which stretched nearly 2,000 feet in front of him Here it was surprisingly cool, and beside the first of the centre cargo tanks he found the first of the charges He paused to wipe his brow and saw the other flashlight coming towards him

Evans came first, unrolling the wire as he did so He looked

exactly what he was—a man who had just stared death in the face. Behind him, Hilary had tied her hair back in a ponytail and had discarded her kimono for a black one-piece swimsuit, yet sweat poured down her legs and shoulders, and the suit itself clung to her body like a second skin.

‘It’s done,’ she said.

‘For God’s sake,’ Maitland protested, ‘I told you to wait. Those wing tanks are full of gas. One spark—’

‘There weren’t any sparks,’ Hilary came up to him, pressed past. ‘It’s done.’

Maitland followed them back down the steel corridor, watched the wire trailing back from Evans’s hands. He wondered what Billy Cronin was doing now, how much he had gathered from that telephone call. But even Billy Cronin could not get anything moving for a few hours yet. And a few hours would be too late. Even for Billy Cronin.

Aya kissed him in the taxi, and when he responded she obligingly sucked in the waistband of her pants to make room for his hands. She had the body of a child. But so splendid to touch. After a few moments she pushed him away. ‘I don’t know how you’ve managed to live this long, Mr Cronin. I could cheerfully strangle you myself, right this moment.’

‘Listen,’ he said and kissed her again. ‘You and I, if we both want it enough, will find ourselves in a bed, sweetheart. But *Eastern Dream*—’

‘Is a ship,’ she said bitterly.

‘Not just a ship, Aya. Don’t make that mistake. *Eastern Dream* is a creation. I don’t think man will ever invent anything more perfect than *Eastern Dream*.’

Aya pulled her sweater down as the taxi slowed, shook her head.

‘You and me, Mr Cronin, we could have done something to ether.’

‘We shall,’ he said and paid the driver before hurrying her past the dumbfounded night watchman and into the elevator.

'You don't figure I might be just a little hurt at the way I'm being treated?' she asked

'You are being treated like royalty,' he assured her 'You are in at the beginning, and you will be in at the end'

'And it doesn't occur to you that this whole thing is just in your mind, Mr Cronin? That this ship of yours is probably at this moment steaming her way happily across Sagami Wan? Isn't that a much more likely situation than some fantastic mutiny or whatever? Oh, I'm sorry'

Because Cronin was looking at her, and it was not a look she had noticed before, or indeed had supposed he was capable of

'I really didn't mean that,' she said

The elevator came to a stop, and the doors opened Cronin gestured her into the corridor 'So forget it, sweetheart My trouble is I don't get drunk Not any more Occasionally I pass out More often than not I just suffer the next day'

The corridor was deserted Aya Nimura stopped and turned against him, but Cronin reached past her and unlocked the door of his office 'Later,' he promised 'Right now I want you to get out the crew list for *Eastern Dream* and then the personnel files for each member of that crew'

Aya Nimura sighed, allowed herself to be pushed backward through the doorway

'All right So tonight we work What do you think happened, or is happening, out there on the rolling Pacific?'

'I don't know,' Cronin said 'Give me John Maitland's file to begin with'

She opened the cabinet, took out Maitland's file, placed it on Cronin's desk, and busied herself with the crew list

Cronin flicked open the cardboard jacket, ran his finger down the entries, looked up as the door opened 'Oh, hello, Mike I didn't mean to drag you away from wherever it was'

Alistair Michaelson wore a dinner jacket and looked at ease He was just below average height and inclined to stoniness, his black hair was greying at the temples, and his face

was faintly porcine. Far from repulsive, it suggested a comfortable contentedness with life as he found it, which, as managing director of World Oil, and with a large percentage of the company shares in his wife's name, was an entirely reasonable point of view. He closed the door and pointed. If Alistair Michaelson had a fault, it was a tendency to point.

'What's that?'

His accent had lost almost all trace of his New England background during the ten years he had lived in London, and was merely a little flat. As to why he had chosen to spend ten years mainly in London, which had involved moving the executive offices of World Oil from New York, no one was quite sure. *He* claimed it was better for business to have the money on one side of the Atlantic and the policy making on the other, and he had a business administration degree, gained at Harvard, to prove his point. Those who knew him well suggested it was because that way he managed to maintain three thousand miles between himself and his fellow directors, most of whom were his wife's relatives. But no one argued with Alistair Michaelson, not even his mother-in-law.

'*That*,' Cronin said, following Michaelson's finger, 'is one of the most delightful backsides in the business. It belongs to a Miss Aya Nimura, who happens to be the niece of Ken Nimura. I bet you didn't know that nepotism had run riot in your very own office. She is, however, only an outcast from the typists' pool, who is helping me as a temporary secretary.'

'Oh, my God,' Aya was saying, a file held in both hands in front of her as if she had been discovered naked. She seemed uncertain whether to curtsy or to bow. 'Good evening, Mr Michaelson.'

'I do not permit women in pants in this office,' Michaelson remarked.

'Oh, I'm sorry I —' She gazed at Cronin.

'She wishes she wasn't in them, if you must know,' Cronin said. 'The fact is, old thing, she did not know she was coming to this office. She thought she was going to bed. I will leave

the rest to your overwrought imagination But it suddenly occurred to me, Why go to bed when we can haul old Mike away from his port and his dirty stories '

Michaelson stood in front of Cronin's desk, and pointed 'You,' he said, 'are drunk One day, Bill, one day . '

'Then hold your breath, because if I've goofed this one you will at last have achieved nirvana,' Cronin promised 'I want your authority to put out a general search for *Eastern Dream* '

Michaelson sat down, lowering his bulk into the armchair in front of Cronin's desk as a prize bull might decide to settle on a particularly succulent piece of grass He eventually came to rest, took a cigar from his breast pocket, looked at it, bit the end, and stuck it into his mouth Aya Nimura watched him from the safety of the filing cabinet, her file fluttering as if caught in a draught

'You,' Michaelson said, pointing with his cigar, 'at eight o'clock at night, which is still hours before dawn off Japan. want to put out a general search on the flagship of this company's fleet You are going to tell me why?'

Cronin handed him the radio-telegrams from *Eastern Dream* and from *Northern Dream*

Michaelson read them slowly

'Eight minutes apart,' he said 'At twenty-five knots, four miles ' He frowned 'Could have been poor visibility '

Cronin handed him the weather reports, gave him the time to read them, and then gave him the weather report from Tokyo 'There is also, of course, the little matter of radar '

'So call Maitland and Brogan,' Michaelson said

'I have called Maitland,' Cronin said 'His was the odd weather report '

'And?'

'He says everything is fine and he'll call me back '

'When?'

'Some time tomorrow '

'Can't you wait?'

'Mike, old chief, that ship is worth well over thirty illo

pounds There is also the little matter of her cargo There is also the big problem her cargo could cause if, just for example, she happened to be wrecked Half a million tons of oil spilled about Eastern Asia You know how pollution-conscious they are in Japan Jesus, they'd ban us from ever trading there again And they have *Western Dream* on the stocks in Nagasaki '

'You,' Michaelson said, pointing again, 'are living in some private nightmare '

'That's why you pay me, to stop *your* private nightmare from ever coming true '

Michaelson puffed on his cigar, glanced at Aya Nimura, and icked ash

'Does that lighthouse have to stand there shaking?'

'Sit down,' Cronin suggested 'No, make us some coffee instead '

Aya dropped the file

'The fact is, Bill,' Michaelson said, 'you have not yet given me a reason for calling out an emergency, with all the bad publicity it must attract Attractively small bottom that girl has '

Aya dropped a coffee cup, it smashed

'So maybe you'll allow her to come to work in pants,' Cronin said 'I happen to know it's her secret ambition The fact is, Michael old boy, I cannot give you anything more than suspicion at this moment, a feeling that something is wrong But it is impossible for two ships that size to pass within twenty miles of each other and not know the other was there And if you can tell me why *Eastern Dream* should report a false weather situation and a false position, I'll take Miss Nimura home to bed without another word '

'But you spoke with Maitland ' Michaelson believed in facts

'And he didn't sound right '

'You didn't say that before,' Michaelson id and looked up as Aya placed a tray with two steaming cups of coffee on

'But sounded odd. Of course, that is not a fact but a supposition. An opinion, if you like.'

'The others are facts. Tell me what they mean.'

'That Maitland has gone around the bend or is under duress,' Michaelson said and looked surprised to have heard the words coming out of his own mouth.

'There could be another reason, Mr Michaelson,' Aya ventured. 'A sort of domestic crisis on board the ship, which will be straightened out in a couple of hours. After all, he'd call Mr Cronin back.'

Michaelson stubbed out his half-smoked cigar. 'Does she often go on like that?'

'All the time,' Cronin said sadly.

'Miss Nimura,' Michaelson said, pointing. 'There are no such things as domestic crises on board my tankers. Certainly nothing which could justify stating a false position and then confirming it, unless the crisis itself was worth reporting.'

'Oh,' Aya said. 'Yes, sir, Mr Michaelson. I'm sorry.'

'Well, you said it,' Cronin pointed out.

'Clark is first officer on board *Eastern Dream*,' Michaelson mused.

'I don't like Clark,' Cronin said. 'Never have.'

'I know that. It was your report on his character that decided us against giving him *Western Dream*. But he's a good man, in subordinate positions. How long has he been with Maitland?'

'Since *Eastern Dream* was launched, three years ago,' Cronin said without looking at the file. 'But they were old friends before that. They've sailed together several times.'

'So Clark would hardly stand by and watch Maitland go crazy and not do something about it,' Michaelson said. 'For Christ's sake, what am I saying? My captains don't go around the bend.'

'So he's under duress,' Cronin said. 'I was afraid you'd come round to that.'

'Give me a crew list,' Michaelson said.

Aya obliged.

Michaelson ran his finger down the names 'Maitland, Clark, Large, Henry, Stewart Dawson is engineer, Christian is doctor Why, in God's name, Maitland wanted those two old fuddy-duddies on a ship like *Eastern Dream* I shall never know Maitland and Clark have their wives along You know something, Bill? I wouldn't have called this the most ambitious crew afloat, but it's certainly the most intimate This lot just about started together, save for Large and Henry, and they are the two most promising young officers I have' He brooded on the rest of the list 'And the crew are all Europeans'

'You, Mr Michaelson, are prejudiced,' Cronin said 'Have I your permission for a search?'

'No,' Michaelson said 'There has got to be another explanation The crews of my ships do not mutiny For God's sake, Bill, go through those files Everyone has a medical and psychoanalyst report attached You couldn't want a saner and a better adjusted group of men'

Michaelson sighed and then glanced at Aya, who had finally sat down in the straight chair she used to take dictation 'All right,' he said 'Where is the ship's last guaranteed position?'

'She was reported by Singapore in the Strait of Malacca a couple of days ago'

'For God's sake, Bill'

'You have to face facts, Mike Sure they have telephoned in every six hours as usual, but if their last position was false, how do we know when it started being false?'

'So the only thing we know for sure is that she entered the Pacific Ocean,' Michaelson said unhappily 'Just what do you have in mind, Bill? I'm not having any international alerts right now'

Cronin shrugged again 'She's your ship'

'She was bound for Yokohama There was nothing to suggest anything wrong until a few hours ago We'll operate from Japan,' Michaelson decided 'But this has got to be done within the company, Bill Spend whatever you like Charter any planes you like, out of Tokyo Whichever boat, if you think it

necessary You'll account only to me But find me that tanker, and find out what's been happening on board her'

Cronin opened his mouth

'No, you cannot have one of the executive jets,' Michaelson said 'We're in the battle against inflation like everybody else If you catch a scheduled flight at dawn you can be in Tokyo by tomorrow afternoon, which is still twelve hours before *Eastern Dream* is due to arrive Call me when you arrive' He stood up 'I'm going back to my party, and then I'm going home to bed I'm not going to worry until I hear from you, one way or the other Make it good, Bill'

He went to the door, glanced at Aya Nimura 'God gave women legs for the gratification of our less fortunate sex, Miss Nimura Next time I see you I want to see your legs' He pointed at Cronin 'And buy yourself a razor'

The door closed behind him

Aya Nimura rested her elbows on the desk and breathed a long sigh 'That is quite a man'

'Remember, it was that kind of talk drove me away from my wife'

'And I bet he doesn't have any hang-ups,' she said dreamily

'He will if we don't find his ship Get on the phone, girl I want a seat on the first available flight to Tokyo First class, as it's company business'

And Suiko? Christ, why think of Suiko at all, when there was Aya here at hand, almost literally Except that there was really no comparison between them In any event, Suiko would have quit by now She'd be married and have a dozen kids and would have forgotten there had ever been a man called Cronin

'Two seats,' Aya said, the receiver in her hand

'Eh?'

'We agreed that the situation was negotiable,' she said 'And so far, I've asked for nothing at all This is it I'd like to come with you to Tokyo I haven't been home for three years Please, Mr Cronin'

He stared at her, frowning 'So far I've had nothing at all '

'Your decision Let me come, Mr Cronin Do that, and I'll be good,' she promised 'You're entitled to take your secretary, aren't you?

Cronin seemed to awake from a deep sleep 'Oh, sure,' he agreed 'Two seats And pack those files I'll go through them on the plane '

CHAPTER FOUR

JOANNE CLARK awoke slowly She sighed, stretched, and rolled on to her stomach, discovered herself to be uncomfortable after a few moments, and turned on to her back again She gazed at the steel deck above her head and listened to the gentle hum of the turbines, so many miles away beneath her bed It had been one of the quietest trips she could remember No storms, not even the slightest gale, and the most boring set of unmarried officers she had ever encountered She had been quite excited at the prospect of this voyage, because Eddy had said that there would be an entirely fresh set of watch-keeping officers, except for himself and Johnny, of course Apparently Johnny believed in this clean sweep every so often, and Johnny always got his way at the head office She wished she knew why Eddy was at least as good a navigator, she was sure He was only a year or two younger than Johnny, too He should have had his own ship more than two years ago But then Johnny had asked for him as his first officer on *Eastern Dream*, and Eddy had apparently been content with that

It was none of her business Jo Clark firmly believed that What men did with their lives was entirely up to them She did not care The only men worth knowing were the off-duty ones Eddy had always had sufficient money, had always allowed her to spend as much of it as she chose, and had never made a fuss at the occasional hint of scandal

She half turned her head, leaving her eyes almost shut. They slept in twin beds, though they still made love from time to time, and she was sure he was still as desperately in love with her as he had been ten years ago. She had taken great care of herself, was almost as slender now as then, was always perfectly groomed and expensively dressed, was never at a disadvantage. As now Eddy had been awake for some time. Something was troubling him. He had not been himself last night at dinner either. Whatever it was, it had to be professional, because they never had any private problems. Jo Clark had never been unfaithful to her husband, merely because she did not like sharing her bed. But she flirted endlessly.

Last night Clive had been quite beside himself. She had been afraid he would tear her dress and had pushed him off with vague promises for tonight, the last night of the voyage, after all. Although there was all the way back as well, but she could begin the return journey by snubbing him. And then

'Oh, my God,' she said and sat up without meaning to, one strap of her pink frilled nightdress slipping down her left shoulder.

'Jo?' Eddy also sat up. 'What's the matter?'

'Last night,' she muttered. 'What happened last night?'

'You passed out.' But he was licking his lips as he did when he was nervous. Now why should he be nervous because she had disgraced herself by passing out?

'I have never passed out in my life,' she said.

Eddy shrugged.

'I was walking with Clive Henry,' she said, half to herself. 'After dinner. We were on the leisure deck and then. What time is it?'

'A quarter to eight.'

'I've slept for ten hours? I never sleep for ten hours.'

'Well, you must have been overtired. All I know is that I was in the saloon with Hilary and Nikky watching the movie when Henry suddenly appeared and said that you seemed to

have fainted. There didn't seem to be anything the matter with you, so we brought you in here and put you to bed.'

'But' Joanne Clark scratched her head, a most uncharacteristic gesture. 'I didn't *have* a lot to drink last night. Didn't Nikky think something was wrong?'

'No, he didn't. Not after he had smelled your breath.' He was trying to sound angry, but he was as nervous as a kitten.

'Well,' she said, 'I certainly didn't pass out. Although I *feel* all right now. But I think I will have Nikky examine me.' She frowned thoughtfully. It was an awfully long time since she had had a medical examination. And if she had suddenly fainted, it could well be her heart.

'My God,' she said, 'you don't think it could be heart trouble?'

'Oh, don't be stupid,' he said. 'Thin people don't have heart trouble. We'll be in Tokyo tomorrow morning, if you still don't feel well you can see a Japanese specialist then. Why don't you spend the rest of today in bed?' Eddy swung his legs out of his bed and transferred himself on to hers. 'Believe me, sweetheart, I don't mind what happened, really. I just don't want to embarrass you.'

Jo gazed at him without actually seeing him. My God, she thought, I could be pregnant. After all this time, all this *care* 'I could be pregnant,' she said.

Clark stared at her for several seconds. Then he got off the bed and started to dress. 'Don't be a fool,' he said. 'After all this time? Maybe we'll do what we talked about and adopt.'

Joanne gazed at him, frowning, he had always been dead set against that idea. 'I could be pregnant,' she pointed out. 'Those things don't always work.'

'You're not.' Clark stuck his cap on his head, opened the door, and went out. Joanne continued to stare after him. He had put on company regulation pants and white shirt but not his jacket. And he had stuck his cap on his head, but at an angle. She had never seen Eddy go out of the cabin in winter without his jacket.

Joanne threw back the covers, wandered into the bathroom, and gazed at herself in the mirror. She cleaned her teeth, washed her face, pulled on loose slacks and a jumper, and finally opened the cabin door and looked out into the corridor. It was suitably empty. The whole ship was distinctly quiet this morning. It hummed along softly, as it had always done. But usually there was at least some jarring noise. Sailors hosing the decks. Some chatter of conversation from the stewards.

She closed the stateroom door behind her, made her way along the corridor of the officers' accommodation deck. At the foot of the stairs, she checked. The carpet was discoloured, and there was a nasty brown stain on the white bulkhead.

'Messy, isn't it?' said Hilary Maitland.

Joanne raised her head. 'Shocking. What is it, soup?'

'Blood.' Hilary leaned against the bulkhead, her arms folded. She wore her kimono.

Joanne glanced at her, and something in her face made her drop to her knees on the clean carpet to stare at the discoloured patch.

'It belongs to Harry Large,' Hilary said. 'He died there, oh, only a couple of hours ago. Johnny killed him.'

Joanne's head jerked backward, as if someone had pulled a string attached to her scalp. She had the oddest feeling in the pit of her stomach. As if hypnotized, she watched Hilary's toe moving towards her in a cloud of blue and white kimono, and then her breath exploded in every direction, and she half-turned and fell against the stairs. Surprisingly, she felt no pain.

She felt herself falling backwards, and then she was on the carpet, her mouth wide as she gasped for air, her stomach rolling as the pain at last started, her head bumping and her hair burning where it was pulled. And yet the most disturbing aspect of her situation was the bloodstained carpet under her back.

That, and Hilary's smile. She had never seen a smile like that before, and it was worse because it was upside down,

and growing, spreading across the white ceiling like some fantastic Cheshire cat

Footsteps, and the burning stopped Joanne rolled on to her stomach, inhaled carpet, and hastily raised her head Unmistakable feet, wearing white trousers and turned outwards like a duck's She had never been so pleased to see Porter in her life

'Porter,' she gasped, 'help me Mrs Maitland'

His voice seemed to come from very far away 'Trouble, Mrs Maitland?' he asked

Joanne's mouth opened and shut as her chin hit the carpet. Desperately she thrust her hand downwards, willed strength into her muscles to push herself up

'Not really,' Hilary said 'I don't think Mrs Clark approves of what we are doing'

Joanne got to her hands and knees, hung there panting. This had to be a dream That was it She had never really woken up

'I'll call Mr Clark,' Porter said

'No' Hilary's voice was sharp 'He's far too busy to worry about her now We'll look after her, Porter'

Joanne rocked back on to her haunches and stared at them She could actually breathe again, and she could see quite clearly They were there, all right

Suddenly Jo was angry For God's sake, she was both bigger and older than this chit of a girl And even if Hilary was the captain's wife, not even Johnny Maitland could defend her now But before she could do anything Porter picked her up and threw her over his shoulder She watched the steps and then the carpeted floor of the corridor swaying by beneath her tears She saw the carpet change colour as they entered the first officer's cabin and a few moments later she was on her own bed She gazed up at Porter, looking embarrassed, and Hilary, still wearing that hateful smile

'I must go, Mrs Maitland,' Porter said 'There's the breakfast to be prepared'

'Porter,' Hilary said, 'you just haven't got what it takes I sometimes wonder if any of you have what it takes, save the captain Go on, Porter Get out Crawl back into your little hole.' She watched him cross the room 'And Porter, I wouldn't tell anyone about this Anyone Or you'll answer to the captain'

The door banged Joanne's breathing was almost back to normal, but the pain still circled her stomach and now her face was burning too.

'Where are we?' Cronin asked

'Just taking off from Athens,' Aya Nimura said 'Why is it you never wake up when we are coming down, but always when we are taking off? I can't understand how anyone can sleep so consistently'

'It was a long night,' Cronin explained 'Athens They generally make you leave the aircraft there If only to be searched'

'They did,' Aya said She still wore her red pants and sweater She hadn't had the time to change, although she had apparently thrown a suitcase together 'But I persuaded them to let you lie You have been fumigated, I shouldn't wonder Oh, and searched as well By that pretty stewardess over there'

Cronin surveyed the distant stewardess She was an extremely good-looking girl Swiss Which made sense, as the only flight Aya had been able to get them on was a Swissair to Tokyo 'What time is it?'

'Where?'

'On this aircraft'

'Well, Athens time is about four o'clock in the afternoon which is three o'clock in London And eleven p.m. in Tokyo Take your pick'

'I was thinking in terms of drinking time.'

'I shall arrange one for you,' Aya promised 'After our discussion of the girl you kept calling for in your sleep I think it is a bit thick, to accumulate a mistress and then promptly

start dreaming of another woman At least it explains why you came in my direction I never realized you had such a good time when you were in Tokyo'

'You are not my mistress'—Cronin decided to follow Michaelson's example and stick to facts—'yet'

'I am going to be,' she assured him 'Your first night in Tokyo is going to be something you shall never forget Now, Suiko'

Cronin shrugged 'A girl'

'I'm very relieved to hear that A Japanese girl'

'Of course She works, or she worked, in our Tokyo office For your Uncle Ken, in fact'

'How many years ago was this?'

Cronin pulled his ear 'It was three I was over there for the launching of *Eastern Dream*'

'What a small world it is,' Aya said 'So?'

'I took her out to dinner and one thing led to another'

'It often does,' Aya said 'So?'

'It's a rather hackneyed tale,' Cronin said sadly 'I was booked back the following day And to cut a long story short, I caught the plane'

'Let me get this straight Everything that led to another happened in one night?'

'I'm a fast worker Or hadn't you noticed?'

'Japanese girls aren't fast responders As a rule Unless they're in it for a profit'

'What are you in it for?'

At least she had the grace to blush 'I'm your secretary Secretaries are supposed to go along with their bosses At least up to a point Let's get back to Suiko You must have knocked her right up to the stars And next day you left But you wished you hadn't'

I wished I'd had the guts not to, yes You may put me down as one of nature's great moral cowards'

'Because she was Japanese? Oh, don't bother about my feelings, Mr Cronin I have no intention of becoming your

wife But if I have my arithmetic right, you were already divorced at the time '

'Your arithmetic is right, and so is your basic reasoning But it was not a matter of races or any damned nonsense like that As I said, I'm just a moral coward There was the business of getting married again, to a girl perhaps half my age, with a totally different background '

'All rubbish,' Aya said, 'if you were in love with her '

'Ah, but was I in love with her? We had one evening together I'm not that impulsive '

'Ah, but what about the thousand-odd dreams you've had since then? If you weren't in love with her when you left Japan, you're in love with her now With the memory of her at any rate '

Cronin brooded on the stewardess She was slowly coming closer, and when she bent over to reach a passenger in the opposite aisle, she showed a lot of sheer panty-hosed leg 'Where would that leave you?'

'Oh, once again, don't bother about me, Mr Cronin,' Aya said 'You want to spend a little more time worrying about yourself '

Aya had, apparently, anticipated his waking requirements, for at this moment the stewardess reached them and promptly produced a cold beer as well as a flashing smile A strange girl—Aya, not the stewardess Perhaps he was out of touch with modern youth But then, Aya could not be classified as a modern youth, European style Surely Or had her upbringing in England so changed her natural instincts?

In any event, to find out, all he had to do was look The files were piled on the let-down table in front of him, he had been about to glance through them when he had fallen asleep Without quite knowing why, he had stuck Aya's file in with those of the crew of *Eastern Dream* Or perhaps he did know why There was something not quite right about her She had refused his dinner invitation instinctively, but later at her apartment she had accepted his advances. And

then there was the business of Alistair. Alistair managed to know everything that went on in World Oil, and not only in the London office. Yet he had not known that the niece of his most senior overseas manager was working in his own office. That was not like Alistair.

He glanced at Aya, but she was brooding out of the window at the endless mountains of Asia Minor as the dusk rushed towards them out of the Middle East. Cautiously he flipped open the cardboard jacket. She was twenty-nine, born in Kyoto. Her father was a minor official in the Japanese diplomatic service who had spent the past twelve years in the various capitals of Western Europe. Which explained her education. Aya had begun work for World Oil just under three years previously, in the Paris office, which was nothing more than a subsidiary branch, really. What she had done between secretarial college and that job was not mentioned. He must find out. From the Paris office she had gone to the Amsterdam office, which had been a bigger job altogether, and then, only two months ago, she had joined the London office. All of which could only make sense to Ken Nimura's niece, junior secretaries are not as a rule transferred. So Aya lived at home, and when Daddy was moved she moved too, and always found herself a job in the local office of World Oil. And within the EEC she did not even have to flash a work permit after the initial job, as she was always with the same company. Very straightforward, if somewhat irregular. No wonder she was looking for something more permanent than replacement stenographer.

And now she was his replacement secretary. But she was also, technically, the most junior girl in the pool. Now that wasn't altogether right either. She must have pulled another string or two. An ambitious girl. She meant to make the most of her opportunity, even if it meant sleeping with Bill Cronin. Out of character? He would have said so, looking at her, talking with her. But then he was a detective, not a psychologist.

In any event, it was her problem, not his. His problem

was the situation with Johnny Maitland Michaelson had promised to call him on the flight the moment Maitland radioed back, if Maitland radioed back Mind you, it would still be the middle of the night in the Pacific If *Eastern Dream* was in the Pacific

He opened Maitland's file Born 1919, in Wallaroo Trust Johnny Australian Navy in 1937 Torpedoed and taken prisoner by the Japanese in 1942 Released in 1945 Employed by World Oil in 1950 And from then on, nothing but up It had taken Michaelson five years to discover just what was what with John Maitland, just as it had taken him a year or two to discover what was what with Bill Cronin

Maitland was prepared to take any ship anywhere or from anywhere and through anything Fifteen years ago, when *Channel Dream* had been overwhelmed by that hurricane just north of Cuba and abandoned as a derelict, it had been Maitland, with a picked crew, who had volunteered to regain control of the ship and bring her home And he had done just that Eddy Clark had been with him on that trip Idly Cronin glanced down the list of highly recommended personnel Able Seaman Mason, Radio Officer Sanding Maitland was loyal to his favourite people They were also on *Eastern Dream* now

Up and up and up, Johnny Maitland Despite the analyst's report—'Determined, resourceful, undoubtedly courageous, and a born leader of men'—the chief head shrinker had written in that peculiarly crabbed hand of his at the bottom of the eight-page investigation (which even listed Maitland's preference in colours red and black), 'But possibly of too wayward and independent a frame of mind to fit into the social conditions required of a senior captain for World Oil'

He remembered Alistair's reaction to that 'For Christ's sake,' Michaelson had said 'We're not a passenger outfit So maybe Johnny brings a shudder to every consul when his *Dream* is in port Afraid he might offend some upstarting port official They still have to buy our oil'

But Mike, with that empirical point of view of his, had left the analyst's comment in the file. While always promoting Maitland. Until four years ago. Four years ago Marge had developed cancer of the colon. A sweet kid, Marge Maitland. As Australian as her husband, with a touch of solid sensibility that had always counterbalanced the incredible romanticism of John. Marge had died slowly and painfully, and John Maitland had been crushed. They had given him a year's leave of absence when it was clear that Marge would not live, and the Maitlands had gone travelling, complete with all the horrible and horrifying appendages necessary to keep Marge alive. It was generally supposed, although it was not in the file, that John had been searching for a cure. After all, he was a great believer in miracles. He'd known quite a few. He'd even met Marge in that Japanese prison camp, and they had fallen in love there while separated by an eight-foot-high barbed wire fence, had survived and married and lived happily ever after. For almost twenty-five years.

So Marge had died. In Bangkok, just three years ago. And Maitland had remained in the Far East for a while. They had even lost track of him, had supposed he had gone back to Australia. Until the day he had reappeared in London with his new incredibly young, incredibly beautiful, incredibly common young wife. Of all the multitudinous staff of World Oil, Billy Cronin had been the most surprised. Because he knew so much about Johnny's background, knew how much Johnny had worshipped Marge. Not that he had been able to find fault with Hilary, except for an uneasy feeling that she was not right for Maitland. But Maitland had always been a man who had done exactly what he felt like doing at the moment he felt like doing it.

And so far as Michaelson was concerned, Maitland could have returned with a fifteen-year-old boy as his bride. Michaelson was interested in the ability, not the social or moral attitudes, of his senior employees. Maitland was back, fit and eager to work. And *Eastern Dream* was just commencing

her sea trials Maitland was the man to command the queen of the World Oil fleet

Cronin flicked the files Maitland had gone about accumulating the crew he had wanted, from the beginning Eddy Clark, Joe Sanding, and—now there was a strange thing. Maitland had asked for all the men, still working, who had been with him when he had picked *Channel Dream* up off the floor That made sense He had asked for the two stewards who had been with him on his two previous voyages That also made sense But for the rest he had apparently not cared a bean Take Chief Engineer Dawson, for instance Maitland had been given the refusal on Jimmy Dawson, because although Jimmy had put in years of faithful service and had now reached the top of the engineering tree within the company, on his last two ships there had been certain questions as to his ability to command his engine room staff One of them, the first question, had been put there by Maitland himself five years ago Yet Maitland had accepted Dawson to run the turbines of the biggest ship afloat That was carrying loyalty a little further than was in character for John Maitland

And Christian Nikky Christian was an old drinking pal of Cronin's, but doctors shouldn't drink to the extent where it interferes with their work And over the past few years Nikky had made more than one costly wrong diagnosis Yet there he was on board *Eastern Dream* Maitland had not queried his appointment Then take Large and Henry. Two bright boys, according to their records But neither had ever sailed with Maitland, while Al Petersen, who had been with him on his previous ship as second officer and had received a very high commendation from his captain for ability and initiative and resourcefulness, had been totally overlooked

Maitland had specifically asked for—Cronin counted slowly—six men Every one quite unexceptional, and quite unnecessary to the running of the ship, saving possibly only Eddy Clark But every one a man who would have absolute

faith in Johnny Maitland. Men who had already followed him into hell and back and no doubt were prepared to do so again. If the price was right.

'Christ almighty,' he said.

Aya turned her head. 'Would you like another beer?'

'John Maitland,' Cronin said. 'He's lifted his own ship.'

Aya frowned politely. 'You'll have to restate that.'

'John Maitland,' Cronin said, speaking very slowly and carefully, 'has hijacked his own ship.'

'Oh, really, Mr Cronin. What were the crew doing while he was doing this?'

'The crew?' he said. 'Except for the six, God knows.' But where did that leave Joanne Clark? And Hilary Maitland?

'And why should he do that?' Aya asked. 'As captain, he has her anyway.'

'Why should he do that?' Cronin repeated, again speaking very slowly. Maitland. Marge. A prison camp, *Eastern Dream*, the most concentrated floating polluter the world had ever known. And possibly more than that. Cronin closed his eyes, envisaged the eastern coastline of Asia. *Eastern Dream* had passed through the Malacca Strait two days before. If she had kept on going east, she'd be somewhere out in the vastness of the Pacific. If she'd turned south, she'd be off Australia. But that didn't make sense. If she'd turned north, as she should, but not for Yokohama. Cronin's eyes opened. Nagasaki, where *Western Dream*, her future sister ship, was three months away from completion. Where the entire coastline, washed by a north-running current, would be at the mercy of her half million tons of oil, where a city, already once devastated, was waiting, totally unsuspecting.

'Christ almighty,' Cronin said again and made for the flight deck.

The Swiss plane captain could not have been more helpful, once he decided that Cronin was not a hijacker and discovered for whom he worked. Michaelson was less co-operative.

'Your big trouble, Bill, is that you only start to work in the middle of the night Over'

'From where I sit, old chief, I can see the dawn coming up over by Christ, I suppose it must be Mandalay or somewhere like that Over'

'You are not supposed to use blasphemy or indulge in idle speculation over the air,' Michaelson pointed out 'And it happens to be a very cold and miserable night here in London It's snowing Over'

'I thought it might Obscenity, too, if you follow me Have I your permission to contact the Japanese Navy? Over'

'No,' Michaelson said 'Not until you tell me just why John Maitland would want to hijack his own ship Why he would need to Over'

'Ransom Revenge I haven't worked that out yet for certain Put your head shrinkers on to it Over'

'You are trying to convince me that he has gone crazy? Over'

'Well, you were almost saying the same thing last night Over'

'I also worked out that Eddy Clark would manage to restrain him It just doesn't make sense, Bill Call me back tomorrow, after you reach Tokyo Maybe something will have developed by then Michaelson over and out'

The pilot smiled, shaking his head Cronin shrugged and returned to Aya She looked asleep, with her legs curled beneath her But she was awake

'Well?'

Cronin sat down with a sigh. 'He won't play'

'He is right, you know, Mr Cronin I mean, hijacking a ship isn't like hijacking a plane Even that takes a bit of organization But to hijack a ship' She laid her hand lightly against his leg

They touched down at Bangkok at ten o'clock in the morning, local time Things in that part of the world being what they are, the transit passengers were not allowed from the

aircraft, and the temperature was ninety in the cabin before the doors were even opened. Aya departed for the toilet and returned minus her sweater and wearing a sheer white nylon blouse, and without bra. Cronin walked up and down the aisle. It was safer than sitting next to her, because she still didn't seem particularly satisfied. Neither was he, for that matter, they had done all the fumbling that was humanly possible while fully dressed.

And there was so much else on his mind.

'Three years,' he said. 'It's been boiling for three years inside Matland.'

'All by himself?' she asked.

'No, not all by himself. There's Hilary.'

'Oh, come now, Mr Cronin. I've been reading the files too. Mrs Matland is only a girl.'

'Some of the most deadly women in history have only been girls,' Cronin pointed out.

'Oh, really? Name me one.'

'Well, Joanna of Naples, for example. The first, not the second. For Christ's sake, darling, stop interrupting my train of thought. Matland quite honestly and sincerely hates the Japanese. Not just from being a prisoner of war. I think he was one of the lucky ones and was quite well treated. It was the humiliation of being captured at all. He's one of the proudest men I have met.'

'It was a long time ago.'

'Not to his generation. And then, I've just remembered, there was a suggestion that Marge's cancer may have really started in that prison camp.'

'Which has to be utter nonsense,' Aya said. 'If it took twenty-five years to develop it could have started anywhere. I'm sorry, Mr Cronin, you are not going to bow my shoulders with guilt. We behaved pretty nastily during an imperial career of maybe fifty years. Your people behaved pretty nastily to their neighbours and anyone else they could lay hands on for damned near a thousand. And the Americans, God bless

them, killed more people in two mornings than we managed in the whole war, just about '

'Sweetheart, I told you, you belong to my favourite race And I agree with your theory about Marge But Maitland was nearly out of his mind at the end For God's sake, don't they ever mean to get this tub into the air again?'

They took off for Hong Kong at eleven The new stew-ardesses were busy serving a second breakfast just to keep the passengers occupied when the new captain came down from the flight deck, glanced over the first-class passengers—there were only five—smiled at Aya, and bent over their seats

'Mr Cronin?'

Cronin opened his eyes 'That's me '

'I'm sorry to disturb you, but there is an urgent message for you from London Would you care to come to the flight deck?'

Cronin went

'I'm never going to sleep again,' Michaelson declared 'What time is it with you? Over '

'Getting on midday Over '

'Well, it's almost dawn here Things just get worse and worse Listen, Bill, the Kagoshima Coast Guard has reported a large, repeat large, unidentified vessel steering north off Kyushu Efforts to contact have met with no success Looks as if you may have been right Over '

'Thank you very much for those kind words What are the Japanese doing about it? Over '

'They are sending out a plane for a closer look, with orders to identify and if possible make contact with the vessel They

'Thank you very much for those kind words What are thought that that could explain everything? Even why Maitland is making for Nagasaki instead of Yokohama? Over '

'It explains nothing,' Cronin said disagreeably 'Alistair, I have never begged you for anything in my life before Come to think of it, I have never begged anyone for anything in

my life before. But I am begging now. Authorize the Japanese government to stop that ship immediately. By any means they think necessary, including sinking her. She's insured, and they can give the crew time to get off. Over.'

'The notice in front of me says, "Be brief,"' Michaelson observed. 'Bill, the altitude is getting to you. I have never sunk a ship in my life, and I'm not going to begin with the best one I've got. Have you forgotten there are forty-two people on board *Eastern Dream*? No, by God, forty-four. There are the two women as well. I've asked Tokyo for a full report, told them it's probably one of ours, and that I'm sending my personal representative to handle any trouble. World Oil accepts full responsibility, Bill. And World Oil, in this context, means William Archer Cronin. Don't goof, fella. And good luck. Michaelson over and out.'

Cronin gazed at the set. The third officer gently removed the earphones from his head.

'Bad news, Mr Cronin?' the captain asked. He was entitled to know. He was breaking every rule in the book by allowing a passenger to use the plane's radio at all. Such was the power of World Oil. And at this moment all of that power rested in the hands of John Maitland.

'There seems to be a difference of opinion about that,' Cronin said. 'But thanks anyway. When do we land at Hong Kong?'

'At fifteen hundred hours.'

'And what's the quickest way of getting from Hong Kong to Japan?'

The captain shrugged. 'By this aircraft. Mr Cronin. We take off again half an hour after Hong Kong arrival, and we arrive in Tokyo about four hours later.'

Cronin nodded. 'Sounds logical. Think you can allow me the use of your radio again for one moment? I'd like our Tokyo office to have a plane waiting for me at Tokyo. It may be important that I get down to Nagasaki as quickly as possible.'

'We will take care of that for you, of course, Mr Cronin,' the captain agreed 'Now, why do you not enjoy your meal? There is nothing that you can do for many hours, at any rate'

Cronin returned to Aya

'They do feed you well on these flights,' she said, finishing her third cup of coffee 'Do you think they've forgotten that we had breakfast already, before Bangkok?'

'I doubt it But they can't very well give us lunch until we've left Hong Kong You're not planning on getting fat, I hope'

Hong Kong was a lot cooler than Bangkok Cronin spent the half-hour wait walking up and down Three years The number was burned into his brain Three years of planning and conspiracy, the last two, at any rate, under his very nose, and he had never suspected a thing

'I don't think you are going to survive the flight,' Aya remarked when they were airborne again 'You have taken on a very peculiar colour'

'It's because I'm short of a drink,' he said and signalled the prettiest of the stewardesses

'I'll have a gin, slightly pink,' Aya said 'Will you tell me why you brought my file along, Mr Cronin?'

He glanced at her, for the moment taken by surprise. He wished he knew

'Oh, it doesn't matter,' she said 'I brought yours'

'Splendid thought Learn anything?'

'Not really Encouraged me to try to learn more Were you really a boxer once?'

'Many, many years ago'

'You don't look like a boxer'

'I was in training then,' Cronin explained

'I mean, you don't have any marks on your face' She smiled at the stewardess.

'Amateur boxers very seldom have marks,' Cronin pointed out 'Their fights never last long enough and are usually

stopped as soon as one of the contestants is clearly outclassed
What did you mean, anyway?’

‘Oh, the dissipation is there,’ Aya said ‘And the sadness
And the disillusion You have a very interesting face ’

‘So you have said before And so do you ’

‘No, I haven’t Why weren’t you picked for that team?’
You seem to have been pretty good ’

‘The night before the Amateur Boxing Association final,’
Cronin said, ‘I went out with a lady and had several stiff
whiskies Unfortunately I was spotted by a reporter from the
sporting press ’

‘Oh, my,’ she said ‘What happened in the fight?’

‘I did have a slight head,’ Cronin said ‘I saw three chins
in front of me and took a swing at the middle one It hap-
pened to be the correct choice I think he was surprised I
hadn’t actually put up my gloves yet There was even some
gossip as to whether he had his guard up yet, or was only
reaching out to touch gloves ’

‘So what happened?’

‘Well, they had to give me the title, because he didn’t come
round for seven minutes I have never hit anyone since Not
that I haven’t felt like it ’

‘I’m very glad you have managed to resist temptation,’ she
said ‘And after that, they wouldn’t pick you for the team?’

‘They wouldn’t,’ he agreed ‘Olympic selection committees
are very big on correct behaviour So they picked him instead
When he woke up He was knocked out in the first round
when he got to the games, as well He must have had a weak-
ness in that direction ’

‘And that made you feel good?’

‘It sure did, sweetheart I’m one of nature’s most vicious,
violent men, as I’m sure you have discovered by now If I’d
won that medal they say I could have, I could have been
heavyweight champion of the world by now, instead of Alistair
Michaelson’s tame bloodhound I could have made a million ’

‘And I would never have met you,’ she said ‘I like things

better the way you are Oh, bother Here comes the captain again Doesn't he look sombre?'

'Do you mind if I sit down, Mr Cronin?' the captain said 'I have a message for you phoned in from your head office'

Cronin slowly unfolded the piece of paper He had a peculiar feeling in the pit of his stomach This time Michaelson hadn't wished to speak with him But the radio operator had carefully printed each word, in English

JAPANESE GOVERNMENT AND WORLD OIL JOINTLY
APPROACHED BY GROUP OPERATING FROM WITHIN JAPAN STOP
PRELIMINARY DEMAND ONE HUNDRED MILLION DOLLARS TO BE
PAID WITHIN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS STOP IF DEMAND REFUSED
TANKER EASTERN DREAM BELONGING TO WORLD OIL WILL BE
BLOWN UP IN ENTRANCE TO NAGASAKI HARBOUR WHERE SHE
IS NOW LYING STOP JAPANESE EXPERTS ENDEAVOURING TO
ASCERTAIN PROBABLE EXTENT OF DAMAGE IF DEMAND REFUSED
STOP BOARD MEETING WITHIN THE HOUR BUT PROBABLE
OPINION WILL BE FOR MEETING DEMAND STOP WILL FLY TO
JAPAN THE MOMENT MEETING ENDS STOP JAPANESE GOVERN-
MENT INFORMED OF YOUR ARRIVAL STOP CO-OPERATE STOP TRY
TO PREVENT THEM DOING ANYTHING DRAMATIC STOP OUR
EXPERTS ESTIMATE PROBABLE DAMAGE RESULTING FROM
DESTRUCTION OF EASTERN DREAM IF DONE IN CORRECT MANNER
MAY AMOUNT TO NATIONAL DEBT AND IN LIVES AS WELL STOP
MOVE BILLY BOY MOVE STOP MICHAELSON

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GREAT SHIP was silent, drifting forward through the suddenly smooth sea Then Maitland spoke his orders into the intercom, and there came a rattle from forward as the port bow anchor was let go

'Helm's amidships, sir,' Mason said and released the wheel

to wipe his brow. He was a short bluff man, with thick iron-grey hair. Of them all, he had been the most difficult to recruit. Now he watched the Coast Guard cutter resting on the water just over half a mile away. 'Think he'll try anything, now we've stopped?'

Maitland rested his elbows on the rail and gazed at the mountains rising above the city behind which the sun was setting with incredible beauty. But then, this was an incredibly beautiful place. The mountains ringed the harbour to protect it from all but the worst of the weather, the city ringed the inner seafront and receded in gentle terraces up the ravine beyond. The harbour itself was surrounded with docks and filled with other ships. And clearly visible on her stocks, not two miles away, was *Western Dream*.

Maitland smiled. 'No, Mr Mason,' he said. 'He won't try anything. He's had his orders, and there's too much at stake.'

First Officer Clark appeared on the bridge. His uniform was untidy and he mopped his brow. 'What's happened?' he demanded. 'I just went down to my cabin and couldn't get in. The door's locked. What's happened to Jo?'

'Nothing has happened to Jo,' Maitland said. 'She went outside after you left her this morning and saw the bloodstain where Large died. She started to have hysterics, so Hilary gave her another sedative and put her back to bed. She'll be all right, Eddy.'

'All right.' Clark peered at the shore, at the mountains, and at the Coast Guard cutter. 'I wish I knew what the hell was going on.'

'You know what's going on, Eddy,' Maitland said with the same patience. 'Our associates on shore have contacted the Japanese government as they were supposed to do. We've carried out our part of the operation. The rest is up to them.'

'And what do we do in the meanwhile?' Clark demanded.

'We wait, Mr Clark. We wait, and we watch. The television will tell us what is happening.'

* * *

Tokyo airport was dark and windswept, its runway lights flickering streets etched in neon. Nimura, World Oil's overseas manager, waited on the tarmac as the big Swiss jet rolled to a halt.

Nimura had managed the Tokyo office, which had direct responsibility for the building of the big tankers in addition to more normal duties, for six years. He was a thin man, short, and with a lined face. Although sixty years old, he had no need of glasses, and although he employed a retinue of secretaries, he seemed to have very little need of them either. He seldom saw them in person, dictated exclusively into a recorder, and expected to have every word he spoke today typed and waiting on his desk for his signature when he arrived at his office at six the following morning.

The extent of the immediate problem was obvious to Cronin as he stepped through the forward doorway of the plane: Nimura was not alone. He was flanked by two men, and three young women, their skirts fluttering in the evening breeze, stood at a respectful distance behind him.

'Bill,' he remarked as Cronin reached ground level. His handshake was strong but perfunctory. Ken Nimura believed that each second of every day had to be accounted for. His gaze flickered past Cronin's left shoulder.

'Her name is Aya Nimura,' Cronin said. 'Your long lost niece.'

Aya, as usual, seemed uncertain whether to curtsy or to bow. Cronin supposed it must be quite a step from the gossipy anonymity of the typists' pool to the dizzy heights of the six-figured-salaried men who ran the company, but it was strange she should be so nervous in the presence of her uncle. Although, as she had said, it was at least three years since she could last have seen him. Ken Nimura did not like London and had only visited it once, for twenty-four hours.

Nor did he, apparently, remember her. He nodded, briefly inspected her costume — fortunately she had replaced her crimson sweater — and then seemed to lose interest.

'Where's my plane?' Cronin asked

'It is waiting,' Nimura said 'But first, there is someone with whom you must speak' He turned and led Cronin across the tarmac

Cronin followed without argument As with Alistair Michaelson, argument with Ken Nimura was a futile exercise

Aya trotted at their heels

'Our luggage'

Nimura's arms never left his sides, but his fingers snapped. One of the waiting men fell into place beside Aya 'We will see to everything, Miss Nimura'

Nimura allowed Cronin to draw level 'Alistair said you have information for me'

Cronin nodded

'This whole business has come as quite a shock,' Nimura confessed. He did not look shocked, or at least no more disturbed than a man whose tyre had blown out on a freeway during the rush hours 'If you have information, it would be nice to have it'

'It is mainly supposition,' Cronin said 'Alistair is not impressed'

'If it is correct supposition, then he must be impressed by now. But come in here' Nimura led his group through the main entrance to the terminal building, delivered a few words of Japanese to the immigration officers, and was hurried away, Cronin behind him, through a corridor and into a private room

Here was a plain table, three straight chairs, a window overlooking the runways, and another man, short even for a Japanese but enormously fat His face, wide, happily smiling as he stood up to greet Cronin, eyes lost behind huge horn-rimmed glasses, seemed to disappear into his collar, below which grotesquely wide shoulders seemed an extension of his neck He wore a pale grey suit, and his white shirt bulged over a tremendous belly He was not even forty, Cronin estimated, and his handshake was firm

'Mr Cronin,' he said, 'I have looked forward to meeting you Ken has told me so much'

'My pleasure.'

Cronin glanced at Nimura

'Captain Ikeda has been placed in charge of this business,' Nimura said and sat down

'My name is Peter,' Ikeda said 'And yours is Bill, is it not?' Sit down, Bill Cigarette?

'I've given them up,' Cronin said Although he felt like one now, desperately

'Men must die,' Ikeda pointed out He lit one for himself, sat back, blew smoke at the ceiling 'Facts, Bill Your ship, the *Eastern Dream*, was sighted making north, inside the Ryukyu Islands, at fourteen hundred hours this afternoon The sighting was not regarded as important at that time, but as radio contact could not be made with the vessel, and we knew nothing more than that she was a large tanker, the Coast Guard sent out a spotter aircraft to locate and identify her and see if she needed assistance The aircraft approached the ship, very close, and was able to make out her name, but all attempts to contact the crew were unsuccessful In fact, there did not appear to be any crew

'We now knew the name and the company of the vessel, and so were able to contact Ken here and ask him if he had received any message from the ship He said no, except that she was due in Yokohama at dawn tomorrow morning, not in Nagasaki at all He then contacted London and received the information that something was wrong with this ship, but no one knew what it was, and that you were on your way to investigate So far no one here, except perhaps Ken himself, was alarmed Perhaps there had been trouble among the crew, certainly there seemed to have been a breakdown in the radio equipment, but the aircraft had reported that she had been steaming normally, although perhaps at a somewhat faster speed than is usual for economic reasons, and that there was no sign of a list or fire on board And she was

now rapidly approaching Nagasaki. Arrangements were made to send out a pilot.'

Ikeda sighed, stubbed out his cigarette, and lit another. 'It was at this stage that we received our first message at police headquarters. It warned us very simply not to attempt to board *Eastern Dream*, as in that case she would be destroyed by an explosion within her, with all the damage and loss of life that would cause. While we were digesting this, news came from Nagasaki. The pilot vessel had been met with a similar warning over the radio as it approached. Someone on board *Eastern Dream* spoke to them and said on no account to attempt to board. The ship was in any event still travelling at very nearly thirty knots, and the pilot boat was unable to get alongside.'

'Your people were able to take a look through binoculars, though,' Cronin suggested.

'Oh, yes, indeed. There were two men on the bridge, and they thought they saw someone on the forward deck. But none of the men wore recognizable officers' uniform. In any event, as I say, the pilot was unable to get alongside, so the pilot boat sheered off and then made contact with the Coast Guard and the police, and also with the World Oil office in Nagasaki.'

'The time was then five o'clock. That is, two and a half hours ago. Naturally there was a considerable amount of activity, both here and in Nagasaki. *Eastern Dream* was off the coast of Kyushu, and about an hour away from the harbour itself at the speed she was travelling. Clearly she would only be stopped by a naval vessel. But to do that would be to require us to be sure there *was* some explosive device on board, and that there was no other means of stopping her from being wrecked. Apart from the enormous damage that would be caused, there remained the lives of the crew to be considered, not to mention the value of the vessel herself.'

'She should have been destroyed at sea.' Cronin said.

Ikeda shrugged 'We know that now I am merely telling you what has happened so far, Bill While the question of what to do was still being debated, we received the second message You have had a copy of it I think '

Cronin nodded

'Well, all I can add is that it came from inside Japan Which is not in the least surprising You cannot steal a ship that size and then attempt to hold an entire city for ransom and not have a vast organization behind you And as you probably know, there are some very strange groups at present at work in our country, people who dream of perhaps putting back the clock and re-entering that world of blood and what they would call honour in which we lived for so long ' He glanced at Nimura 'I would even suggest that some members of the organization we are dealing with must have infiltrated World Oil itself '

'I cannot accept that,' Nimura said 'Anyone holding any position of responsibility in my office has been with me for years '

'Perhaps, Ken,' Ikeda agreed 'But then I would suggest that this scheme must have taken one or two years to plan and execute '

Nimura tossed his head impatiently, it occurred to Cronin that he was more worried than he pretended

'And *Eastern Dream*, meanwhile?' he asked

'At eighteen fifteen hours precisely, *Eastern Dream* anchored in the entrance to Nagasaki harbour She is in the exact middle of the channel, about two miles from the town waterfront and a similar distance from her future sister ship, *Western Dream*, which as you know is very nearly ready for launching '

'I would say she's well placed, from the opposing point of view '

'Very well placed,' Ikeda agreed 'Where she is, she not only effectively closes the port of Nagasaki to all but very small ships, but she is so placed that *should* she explode, the blast

will be confined by the mountains and will run forward into the city itself. The destruction will be enormous.'

'Nineteen forty-five all over again,' Cronin said.

Ikeda smiled.

'I think it could be worse, Bill. That atomic bomb was not as destructively aimed as it might have been. It was dropped farther inland, where the mountains are neither so high nor form such a corridor, and a great part of the blast merely dissipated itself in the air. Unlike Hiroshima, where the mountains acted as a natural reflector.'

'*Eastern Dream's* cargo is not explosive,' Nimura said.

'I wouldn't count on that,' Cronin objected. 'Even crude oil will explode under certain conditions, and we don't know the size or the number of these bombs that are supposed to be on board. Another thing, a hell of a lot will depend on the gas situation. If whoever they are had this in mind for a while, they will have been accumulating gases on board instead of getting rid of them every day, as is normal.'

'That is a highly dangerous and irregular thing to do,' Nimura pointed out, and smiled at his own joke. 'I am not minimizing the danger, Bill. I am only anxious that we should not let these people bluff us.'

'You say the build-up of gas is supposed to be relieved every day,' Ikeda said. 'Whose responsibility is this?'

'Well, basically the captain's,' Cronin said. 'But in practice it would be delegated to the first officer.'

'But it would not be possible for any members of the crew to accumulate gas without the officers knowing?'

'Of course not,' Nimura said.

'But . . .' Cronin began.

'And would it be possible to accumulate sufficient gas to cause a serious explosion, say in forty-eight hours?' Ikeda asked.

'No,' Nimura said. 'Sufficient to cause serious damage to the ship perhaps. But not to anything at a mile's distance.'

'Well, that is a relief, at any rate,' Ikeda said.

'But in a week,' Cronin said, '*Eastern Dream* could very easily be converted into a floating bomb'

'I do not understand,' Ikeda said 'Ken has explained that this is impossible'

'Without the connivance of at least one of the officers, and perhaps the captain,' Cronin said

'And you are saying' Nimura began

'I think John Maitland is still in command I told you, Ken, Alistair doesn't go much for my theories But that's what I think'

There was a moment's silence Ikeda lit a fresh cigarette

'I would have said that that is surely the least likely of all possibilities,' Nimura said quietly

Cronin related his various conversations with the ship and also gave a brief summary of Maitland's file 'Something happened after the death of Margery Maitland Something out in the East, about which we know nothing The visible sign was the appearance of this new wife of his But Maitland never said a word about what he had been doing the year after Marge died, and of course none of us wanted to pry'

'You are suggesting that the man is mad,' Nimura said

'Maitland has always been a flamboyant personality He sees life as endless drama, and lives it that way too Everything to him is bigger and more compelling than perhaps it seems to you or me To most people that's just another way of saying he is an ambitious man, but the line dividing too much ambition from insanity can be pretty thin'

'And you discount entirely the theory that he may be under duress?' Ikeda said

'Not entirely But I just do not see John Maitland *being* under duress I've an idea he'd rather be dead'

'They may have brought pressure to bear on his wife,' Nimura suggested 'A middle-aged man with a young and beautiful wife can be very vulnerable'

'Maybe,' Cronin said without conviction

'I think that Bill suspects the new Mrs Maitland may be

one of the terrorists,' Ikeda said 'Let us assume that you are correct in your reasoning, Bill, and Captain Maitland has been working with this group for perhaps three years. Where would he get the men to follow him? He cannot possibly be doing this with just the assistance of his wife.'

'He has four men on board who have served with him on every ship he has ever commanded. He also has Eddy Clark as first officer. Clark is his oldest friend and has been with him for all of the past three years. It is also just on three years ago that the board voted to build *Western Dream*. Clark was the natural man for the post of captain. But he was informed then that he was not going to get it. On my recommendation, incidentally.'

'Yet they are two of the most senior officers in your fleet,' Ikeda said 'These men must have a lot of hatred in them.'

'Maitland, maybe Clark has not got the character for hatred or command. He is very efficient, very thorough, but lacks backbone. That is why he was not going to get *Western Dream*. So maybe he is also greedy. That I wouldn't know.'

'Six men,' Ikeda said 'Out of a crew of forty-two, as I understand it. What of the others?'

'I wish I knew,' Cronin said 'I have no idea what has happened to them. Or even if they are still alive.'

'I cannot believe that Maitland is a murderer,' Nimura said 'I do not really believe Bill's theory that he is still in command of the ship. But to suppose that he would kill his own crew—it is not a natural act.'

'Is it a natural act to hold a nation to ransom?'

'It is criminal, certainly,' Nimura agreed 'But he must expect to get away with it.'

'How?' Cronin demanded.

'There will be a way,' Ikeda said 'We have been told to wait for a further message, after we have agreed on the air to pay the ransom. Has your company decided on this yet?'

'Yes,' Cronin said 'Well, virtually. Even Alistair Michaelson hasn't the right to just give away a hundred million

dollars But he is meeting the board now, and I imagine he'll be in touch as soon as they are done '

'But your board will agree?' Ikeda asked

'Yes,' Nimura said

Ikeda nodded

'We must reply at nine o'clock tonight Tokyo time That is in less than two hours '

Nimura got up 'Then I will call London now and inform them of the present situation, and also of your arrival, Bill We must know at once if they will confirm payment ' He stood up, bowed very briefly in the direction of the police officer, and left

'Poor Ken,' Ikeda said 'I have never seen him so upset '

'It's an upsetting business,' Cronin said

Ikeda smiled 'Indeed And you were not exaggerating just now? Is it your opinion that *Eastern Dream* will explode—or perhaps I should say *can* explode—if these people so desire?'

'That is my opinion I'm not saying she'll actually go off like a bomb, but she'll break a few windows And that's only half of the problem You see, it won't have been possible for the terrorists, even if Maitland is working with them, to have placed any charges while the main tanks were empty, or the wing tanks, for that matter There are just too many people crawling over a ship like *Eastern Dream* all the time '

Ikeda opened a drawer in the table and spread a large blueprint in front of him 'Ken very kindly supplied me with this Ah I see what you are talking about There are centre cargo tanks all the length of the ship and outside them there are wing cargo tanks Yes So when would the explosive charges, supposing they are not trying some gigantic bluff, have been placed?'

'I would say whenever the ship was taken over, which may have been only yesterday '

'And how would these charges be laid at sea? Especially if they have been building up gases in the tanks?'

'They couldn't be laid at all in the centre tanks,' Cronin

said 'But they could be laid against the outside of the wing tanks'

'Outside the hull, you mean?'

'No' Cronin bent over the blueprint and swayed. He had forgotten how exhausted he was. It seemed an eternity since last he had actually lain in a bed, and in the meantime he had flown nearly ten thousand miles. 'The outer skin of the ship is hollow—it is a double thickness for additional strength—but there is room for a man to travel the entire length of the ship in there.'

Ikeda nodded. 'And that is where the charges will be.'

'In my opinion.'

'Of course. But you are an expert. Believe me, I am very glad to have you available. Now tell me what will happen if those charges are fired.'

'That depends on the strength of the charges. I don't think it would take very much to blow the wing tanks, supposing there is one charge to each tank.'

'And what would happen then?'

'There'd be an almighty bang and a considerable blast. I don't think the central tanks would necessarily explode, if the explosion broke the back of the ship all the oil would leak out.'

'And catch fire?'

'Probably. You could say that Nagasaki harbour would become a vast burning lake.'

'And very probably the town would also burn,' Ikeda said. 'And that is a small charge, you say. What about a charge big enough to blow the main tanks as well?'

'A bigger bang,' Cronin said. 'But I don't think it's likely.'

'Why not?'

'Difficulty of access, and also of carrying sufficient explosives, as they must have been placed on board secretly. Besides, I'm not convinced it would do as much damage. My own personal bet would be for an explosion which would erupt the wing tanks and break open the ship, allowing the oil to seep out and

spread. Burning or not, your people in Kyushu would have a pollution problem on a scale never seen before'

'Thank you That is a very helpful assessment of what we are up against, even if a pessimistic one Now, I understand that it is your intention to fly down to Nagasaki tonight May I ask why?'

'Well, that's where the action is, wouldn't you say?'

'But what would you hope to achieve?'

'I thought I might be able to speak with Maitland'

'Assuming it is Maitland in command, of course'

'That is my assumption,' Cronin said patiently

Ikeda nodded 'And what would you say to him?'

'Well, for God's sake, Captain, he doesn't have a hope in hell of getting away with this'

Ikeda lit a fresh cigarette 'I think he does, if everyone plays ball I am sure that he has worked out an escape route, and I am equally sure that I know what it will be But for all we know, he is on a suicide mission, in which case talking with him will not help matters at all'

'You're thinking of your own people, Peter Maitland isn't the suicidal type'

'So now you are agreeing with me But I should like to point out that in *my* opinion Maitland is nothing more than a pawn in the game The incident is controlled by a group of fanatics here in Japan, those who sent us the message and who will send us all other messages, I should think And while I repeat that your Captain Maitland may have his escape worked out to his own satisfaction, it will depend on *their* co-operation It occurs to me that these people may have quite different ideas Now that Maitland has delivered his floating bomb, he is expendable Am I right?'

'There is a thought,' Cronin said 'It is also a good point to put to John Maitland'

'Perhaps,' Ikeda said 'But it will keep until tomorrow morning'

'But ,

'No one will get near the ship before then,' Ikeda said 'The terrorists, providing we accept their terms by nine o'clock tonight, are going to contact us again before midnight, with instructions both for the delivery of the money and for the escape of the crew of *Eastern Dream*. We already know that the money must be ready for delivery by dawn tomorrow.'

'By dawn? A hundred million dollars?'

'My government is working on that now. It will be available, I can promise you that. My point is that the escape of the crew can hardly be arranged before that. We have more than ten hours, and you are a very tired man. Bill, You are drooping as you sit there. I would like you to go to your hotel and have a hot bath and a good dinner, and then at least a few hours' sleep. I will call for you tomorrow morning about five. We shall pick up the money and then go down to Nagasaki.'

Cronin gazed at him. 'Ten hours isn't really very long, Peter old chum. I was told to do what I could to stop this business. I'm not going to accomplish very much lying in bed in a hotel in Tokyo.'

'You hope to accomplish something in Nagasaki?'

'For Christ's sake,' Cronin shouted, 'Nagasaki is the only place where I can accomplish anything. Don't you see that? I know nothing about your territorial groups. But I do know *Eastern Dream*. And her crew.'

'Exactly so,' Ikeda agreed imperturbably. 'It is your knowledge that I would use, Bill. Do not be impatient. I would prefer it if those on board *Eastern Dream* were not disturbed or alarmed in any way for the time being. I do not even wish them to be aware that you have come to Japan. We have to move very slowly, very carefully, and, most of all, every step we take must be the correct step, until *Eastern Dream* is disarmed. But we have ten hours. I want your brain to be as fresh as possible when we make our play.'

Cronin sat down very slowly. 'I'm not sure I heard you right. You figure on disarming *Eastern Dream* before the ransom is paid?'

Ikeda smiled 'Before or after Who knows? That is a detail But you do not seriously think that the Japanese government is going to surrender to blackmail of this sort? What would be the point in having a government at all, if any crazy fool could hold it to ransom on this scale? No, Bill, no We shall pretend to go along with them We shall agree to their every demand We shall pay the ransom, if we have to But we will get them And we will also get on board *Eastern Dream* and literally spike their guns I intend to make my move tomorrow morning With your assistance '

CHAPTER SIX

NAGASAKI glowed No doubt it glowed every night Although it was February, here in the south the climate was almost subtropical, and unless there was a wind off the sea there was hardly any reason to wear a jacket, much less draw a curtain

Nagasaki took itself seriously, not only as the fourth industrial city of modern Japan but as one of the great historical cities of the empire of the Mikado In Nagasaki the British and the Dutch, the Spanish and the Portuguese, had set up their trading factories at the turn of the seventeenth century, and even after the Tokugawa shoguns had decided that Europe had nothing to offer Japan and had expelled or executed the foreigners, it had been Nagasaki's privilege to retain the one trading post, the Dutch factory on the islet of Deshima, which was to remain Nippon's sole window on the world for over two hundred years

Tonight the historical Nagasaki regard for the Europeans was tinged with a certain element of apprehension, a large number of the citizens were already preparing to move out just in case But the majority were ready to make the best of their predicament They knew exactly the situation they were in There had been nothing else on their television

screens since seven o'clock this evening and many had already tiptoed down to the shore to gaze at the giant tanker

That *Eastern Dream* should be sitting in the centre of the main channel, loaded with oil and an unknown amount of explosive gases, manned, according to the television announcer safely tucked away inside a Tokyo studio, by a determined group of terrorist hijackers, was unbelievable to the citizens of Nagasaki

But now at last there was movement on board the tanker. Or at any rate, lights appeared on deck. The captain of the Coast Guard cutter, under strict instructions not to venture within the half-mile limit imposed by the terrorists, knew at once what was happening and issued a series of terse orders. The sightseeing vessels were less informed and less knowledgeable, and also less expertly manned. They seemed insensibly to collect in a huddle, rubbing strake against strake, to the accompaniment of much excited criticism and comment at the suggestion that the inert monster might be coming to life.

On board *Eastern Dream* Porter and Evans, each armed with a rifle, stood one on either side of the gangway down to the big launch that bobbed gently alongside the accommodation ladder. At the door to the storeroom Mason and Sanding had taken their positions, also armed with rifles. They gazed in at the anxious faces of their late shipmates, waited while Captain Maitland came down the corridor. Behind them, armed with pistols, were Eddy Clark and Hilary Maitland.

John Maitland stood in the doorway, drew a deep breath. But he was becoming more accustomed to his position now. How incredible, to be captain of such a ship and have to get used to total authority.

He cleared his throat. 'I'm going to set you ashore,' he said. 'We are in Nagasaki harbour, and there are a large number of boats all around us. All you have to do is make for the town and you will be taken care of.'

They stared at him, still confused by what had happened. Chief Engineer Dawson and Dr Christian were more confused than any. These men had thought themselves his friends. They had grown in seniority along with him. Served by Porter and Evans, they had shared drinks with him every evening of the voyage out, as they had shared drinks with him on so many other occasions on previous voyages. Now they stared in incredulity at this jacketless figure with an automatic pistol stuck into his waistband.

'But I must warn you,' Maitland went on. 'You will come out two at a time and go down the ladder into the launch. Any attempt to rush this doorway and you will be shot. Any attempt to cause trouble while you are on deck and you will be shot. I hope that is clearly understood.'

'You're mad,' Christian muttered. 'Don't you understand, John? You're having a breakdown. For God's sake, man, give over. Up to now I can maybe suggest that you've been working too hard. Put us ashore and you're well, you're guilty of piracy. I won't be able to do anything for you.'

'You first, Christian,' Maitland said. 'And remember what I said. I'd be sorry to have to put a bullet in your gut. You next, Jim. Sorry it had to end like this.'

'Nikky's right, John,' Dawson said. 'You can't get away with it, you know.'

'Get away with what?' Maitland asked.

'With'—Chief Dawson gazed up the ladder at his captain with an even more incredulous expression than earlier—'with whatever you are doing. Stealing this ship.'

Maitland shook his head. 'I haven't stolen any ship, Jim. World Oil are going to get her back intact. If they want her back I've just borrowed her for a day or two. Now get on with it.' His voice had accumulated a rasp.

Dawson hesitated, then shrugged and stepped through the door. He looked untidy. He had been bundled into his white tropical uniform; it was crushed and dirty, and there was a two-day-old white stubble on his chin. He looked incredibly

old Too old to be chief engineer on board the largest ship in the world

In the corridor he paused, gazed at Hilary Maitland and then at Eddy Clark. He seemed about to speak again, and then shrugged again and walked past them to where the two stewards were waiting, their rifles also at the ready. Christian followed him without speaking. Then the remainder of the crew slowly followed the example of their officers. Clive Henry came last. He looked around him, perhaps searching for Harry Large. They had been friends. But Large was not to be seen, and neither was Joanne Clark.

Fifteen minutes later the launch was filled and the engine started. Slowly she moved away from the side of *Eastern Dream* towards the cluster of brightly lit boats in the distance. The Coast Guard cutter's lamp started winking, and the launch altered course.

Maitland sighed, took out a handkerchief, and patted his brow. 'Sheep,' he said, half to himself. 'You'll bring up the ladder, Evans.'

'Aye, aye, Captain,' Evans said. But he hesitated. Maitland glanced at him and then at his other accomplices. They had all gathered behind him, and their weapons were still in their hands. In front of them stood Eddy Clark.

'Yes?' Maitland asked. There was no apprehension in his voice. Even had he been at all afraid of Eddy, he had seen what they had apparently forgotten. Hilary Maitland had remained behind them, almost lost in the darkness, her weapon was still in her hands.

'We want to know what is going to happen, John,' Clark said. 'And I want to know why Joanne was not put ashore with the others. I want to know why I haven't been allowed to see her. You said—'

'That she is under sedation,' Maitland said. 'She is still under sedation. But she will be all right.'

'When will she be all right?' Clark demanded. 'I want to know exactly what is going to happen. All of us do. We've

followed you blind up to now. Now we want to know. When do we get paid? How do we get off this ship? And when are we going to be in contact with the company?’

Maitland smiled. ‘You seem to be getting anxious, Eddy. I suggest we all go and watch television. It’s just coming up to nine o’clock.’

Tokyo also was waking up. The piano bars in Rappongo were being dusted, the restaurants were starting to fill, a million mouths were starting to water as the *sukiyaki* and *shabu-shabu* were prepared. Several million commuters were finding their way home, filling every freeway with endless streams of yellow light. And everywhere television and radio sets were being tuned, waiting for the nine o’clock announcement.

In Ken Nimura’s Cadillac the chauffeur had also turned up the radio and was listening as he drove along the freeway from Haneda airport into the heart of the city. The radio played music, and Nimura himself hummed softly. Cronin gazed out of the window. He still wasn’t quite sure where he was. Flying halfway around the world usually does that, as he knew well enough.

But he was still attempting to digest what Peter Ikeda had told him.

‘The Israelis got away with it,’ he muttered at the window. ‘They’ve had a lot of practice. You realize that if he makes the slightest mistake he could blow half of Nagasaki sky high?’

‘Peter Ikeda does not make mistakes,’ Nimura remarked. ‘He will have every facility available. Even the defence forces are standing by, should he require their assistance. More important than that, he will have your knowledge, your imagination to help him.’

Cronin gave him a glance, but the Japanese was only a shadow in the darkness of the car.

‘I need a drink,’ he said.

‘And you shall have one. When you get to the hotel. It is one of the best in Tokyo. Certainly it has the best bar.’

'I should be on my way to Nagasaki now,' Cronin muttered 'How the hell I let that smooth-talking cop put me off Where's Aya?'

'Waiting for you at the hotel, I should imagine I thought it best to send her there direct She seemed to me to be very tired'

Very tired But not that tired Christ almighty! He hadn't really considered the situation in the light of a hotel ten thousand miles from home He had anticipated spending part of the night flying down to Nagasaki, and the rest in trying to make contact with John Maitland Those, after all, were his orders

Instead he had been taken over by the Japanese police force while they laid their own plans, of which he had not been informed, except that he knew they were planning to attempt what he had specifically been forbidden to allow He wondered when Michaelson would arrive Nimura had managed to contact London and speak with him, and had been told that the board had authorized payment of the ransom Not without some consideration, Michaelson had said Consideration Alistair Michaelson would have stood at the end of that long mahogany table and pointed at one of them after the other He would have said, punctuating each word with a stabbed forefinger, 'There are people's lives at stake Hundreds, thousands, maybe tens of thousands of people's lives Get that into your heads, gentlemen And there is also the life of our ship Not just *one* of our ships Maitland means to destroy *Western Dream* as well, before she is even launched What is a hundred million dollars compared with the lives of those ships and all those people?'

At this stage someone out of the assembly—peers of the realm, merchants, bankers, tax and legal experts—would have attempted to speak

Bang, bang, bang, would have gone Michaelson's forefinger 'I know,' he would have said, 'I know The ships are insured Gentlemen, we shall never build two such ships as these If

anything happens to *Eastern Dream*, that will be the end of World Oil as a major commercial power in the world. It will be the beginning of the end for us all. Gentlemen'—bang, bang, bang—'You must agree to pay this money. We shall get John Maitland and all his associates. Bill Cronin will see him behind bars. I promise you this. He is in Tokyo now, on Maitland's track. And I shall be joining him.' When? But Michaelson would have had them eating out of his hand. Michaelson had that gift. Michaelson was probably on his jet now. The fastest jet in the business.

'Peter was right, you know,' Nimura remarked. 'You want to relax, Bill. You are uptight. I know you will not sleep tonight. But you must relax. Tell me, is my niece anything more than a secretary to you?'

'Eh?' Cronin started.

'I am glad of that. Not because she is my niece. But a man should not sleep with his secretary. And I have a message for you. Do you remember a girl called Asano? Suiko Asano?'

'My God,' Cronin said and wished his heart would stop leaping about his chest, 'don't tell me she still works for you.'

'Suiko is *my* secretary now,' Nimura said. 'She is a very good, very efficient young woman. And she remembers you very well. When we received the message that you were coming to Tokyo she especially asked to be remembered to you. I think it might be a good idea for you to call on her now, before going back to the hotel.'

'But

'I know she will be glad to see you, Bill,' Nimura said. 'And you are in Japan. Why not be Japanese for tonight? I will have my driver drop me on that corner over there, and then he will take you to her apartment.'

'Oh, I can't.'

'Think nothing of it,' Nimura smiled in the darkness. 'I also have a place I like to visit when life becomes too filled with stress. I will call for you at the hotel tomorrow morning early. I am sure that by then Peter will have completed his

preparations' He spoke to the driver in Japanese and then turned back to Cronin 'You will listen to the television broadcast?'

'I shouldn't think so,' Cronin said 'Seeing that I know what he is going to say'

Nimura nodded 'Then I will wish you a good evening'

The car stopped and he got out, smiled at Cronin and closed the door The car glided away from the sidewalk, the driver had received his instructions

Christ almighty, Cronin thought Suiko Remembering him Asking after him

And suppose she wasn't home? Suppose Ken had really got it wrong, and she wasn't expecting him to call? Worst of all, suppose that night three years ago had been just one of those nights which happen now and then and should be treasured throughout life but never attempted again

The car was stopping Sweat poured down his face The driver had switched on the interior lights and was turning around to look at him

'Where?' Cronin asked stupidly

'This building sir,' the driver said in perfect English 'Miss Asano is on the fifth floor Her name is there'

'Thank you,' Cronin said and got out He stood on the pavement and watched the car drive away Then he looked in the window The shop sold women's lingerie in black lace He wondered if Suiko ever shopped here Somehow he didn't think so His memory of Suiko was of no lingerie at all

He went into the doorway at the side of the shop This was a very good district But then, as Ken Nimura's chief secretary, Suiko Asano would earn a very substantial salary She would no longer be interested in the Cronins of this world

He climbed the stairs There was an elevator—it was impossible to imagine a Tokyo apartment building without an elevator—but he did not feel like taking it He climbed slowly, step after step after step On the fifth floor he surveyed the names Asano

The door was open and there she was Suiko Asano was about five feet two inches tall, with a surprisingly aquiline face, which seemed to come together in a point, yet was softly rounded at nose and mouth and chin Presumably it was a small mouth, but it widened when she smiled, and after a moment's hesitation she was smiling now She had near perfect teeth and wide black eyes The secondary lids were there, closing Orientally over the corners, but the blackness was unaffected Her black hair was still parted in the centre and then loose on her shoulders She wore a crimson kimono

'Bill?' she asked softly

'None other,' he said with utterly false joviality

'I heard this afternoon that you were coming to Tokyo,' she said

She stepped back, the door open wide

Cronin entered He had forgotten how Japanese Suiko really was The room was twelve tatami in size, which is to say there were twelve mats made of rice straw, each six feet long and three feet wide, covering every inch of the floor As he was not expected, Suiko apparently had been preparing for bed The mattresses were laid on the floor by the electric fire, the dinner dishes and the low table had already been removed, bowls of flowers occupied each corner, each stalk exquisitely arranged, and needless to say the television set was on, depicting some endlessly violent samurai adventure in brilliant colour

Two mattresses?

But he had forgotten, there is no such thing as a Japanese girl on her own Mrs Asano came out of the back of the apartment at that moment It occurred to Cronin that to apply the old test of looking at a girl's mother to see what she might be like in thirty years' time would here be to make oneself a vast promise Mrs Asano was a truly beautiful little woman, with the most delicate features and luxuriant black hair

'This is Mr Cronin, Mama san,' Suiko said in English 'I have spoken to you of him'

Mrs Asano bowed 'I welcome you to our house, Mr Cronin.'

'I'm sorry to come barging in like this,' Cronin said. 'But I happened to be in Tokyo'

'And I am honoured that you should have thought of us Of my daughter'

Suiko was smiling Just smiling No pretensions here No coquetry Suiko knew why he was here As did her mother

'Now I am going downstairs to see some friends,' she said 'It is a great pity that I should be leaving as you arrive, and I hope you will excuse my rudeness'

'I perhaps I will see you before I leave'

'Perhaps,' Mrs Asano said and bowed

Cronin watched the door close behind her

'I did not mean her to go out'

Suiko smiled 'She is glad to do so, Bill She is glad you came to see me on your first night in Tokyo when you have so much to do'

Of course she would know as much as he did about *Eastern Dream*

'I wanted to explain About three years ago'

Suiko continued to smile and at last moved She rested her hand on his arm for a moment 'Three years is too long, Bill'

'But you got my note?'

'I still have your note You would like whisky? Or saké? I have whisky'

'Saké,' Cronin said How dry his throat was

'I will prepare it Sit down, Bill' Her smile widened into a soft laugh 'You are no longer used to sitting on the floor?'

'The floor suits me Do we have to have the television?'

'No,' she said 'I thought you might like to hear the announcement'

'The announcement isn't for over an hour,' Cronin pointed out 'And I can tell you what it is going to be, anyway I came here to forget about announcements'

Suiko switched off the set 'I will get the saké' She hesitated in the inner doorway 'You have been flying from London All the night, and now it is night again Would you like a bath?'

Cronin's head turned slowly. After three years nothing had changed. Nothing at all. 'Yes,' he said. 'I would like a bath, Suiko.'

The announcement was terse and to the point. 'In view of the grave threat to both life and property, in Nagasaki and the entire Amakusa region, as well as to the shipbuilding industry, were the *Eastern Dream* to explode, the government, after consultation and with the full agreement of World Oil, has decided to meet the terrorists' demands. Of the hundred million dollars, half will be paid by the government and half by World Oil.'

The broadcaster spoke in Japanese first, and then, just so there could be no confusion or misapprehension on board the tanker, repeated his message in English. When he was finished, Maitland switched off the television set.

There was a short silence. Then Evans gave a soft whistle. 'A hundred million dollars?'

'Of which we get two hundred and fifty thousand each,' Clark muttered. 'I make that a quarter of one per cent.'

'It is still a great deal of money, Eddy, which sounded attractive the first time you heard it.' Maitland had moved to the back of the officers' television lounge. Hilary had also remained standing but had moved farther to the right, away from the door. Between them they covered the entire room, without interfering with each other's line of fire. And the others had all left their rifles outside, it had seemed the natural thing to do before entering the officers' lounge.

'Supposing we live to enjoy it,' Clark said.

'You'll live, Eddy. Unless you louse it up.'

'But just how do we get off the ship, Captain Maitland?' Sanding asked.

Sanding was the youngest of the men, no doubt he had the most reason for wishing to live.

'It's all been arranged, Mr Sanding,' Maitland said.

'By the people ashore?' Mason asked.

Maitland glanced at him. Mason had never failed to address him properly before.

'By our friends ashore, Mr Mason,' he said. 'You'll be taken care of.'

'But we're still the ones in the hot seat,' Clark said. 'We're the ones sitting on top of a floating volcano. And afterwards, we're the identifiable ones. They're not. And we get a quarter of a million apiece, while they scoop the pool.'

'Not for themselves, Eddy. Not for themselves,' Maitland continued to speak in a soft, relaxed tone. He spoke so quietly, in fact, that no one noticed that the pistol had disappeared from his belt and that only his left hand was visible, his right rested behind his back. 'They have much more need of the money than any of us. They are footing the entire bill, not only of getting us from this ship to a place of safety, but also of resettling us wherever we elect to go.'

'Are you getting a quarter of a million as well, Captain Maitland?' Porter asked.

'I happen to be one of the principals of this operation,' Maitland said. 'And I have more to lose than any of you.'

'Not than me,' Clark said.

'Much more, Eddy. Your career is just about washed up, and you know it. Cronin doesn't think you have what it takes. And what Cronin says goes.'

'That's a lie!' Clark shouted. He stepped forward, closer to Maitland. 'I think just about everything you've told us has been lies. I wonder just what you and your friends do intend. I think it's time you told us the truth, John. For all we know, we could be on some kind of suicide mission. That's what the Japs go in for, isn't it? Suicide.'

He paused for breath. Maitland glanced around the cabin. His right hand was still invisible.

'How about you chaps?' he asked. 'Anyone else feel as uncertain as Mr Clark?'

They hesitated, exchanged glances, Porter licked his lips.

'Because I should point out,' Maitland said, 'that no one has

to go on with this enterprise if he doesn't wish to. In fact, it would be better for the rest of you if someone were to drop out. The terms of my agreement with our Japanese agents stipulate that my crew receives one and a quarter million dollars between them, so long as there are five of you, that works out at a quarter of a million each. But if anyone should choose to leave the ship before the mission is completed the proportion per head very naturally goes up.'

He smiled at them.

'But of course,' Hilary said softly, 'it would be very difficult to drop out now in any case. Harry Large is dead. You should remember that.'

'We didn't kill him,' Clark said.

'You are an accessory. As well as an accessory to piracy, Eddy. You would be sent to jail, even if you got away with a short sentence. But if you stick with us to the end, you will at least have two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and there are enough places in the world where you will be able to start again with that kind of capital.'

'It's those places we'd like to hear about, Mrs Maitland,' Mason said diffidently. 'And about how we're going to get there.'

Maitland shook his head. 'You'll have to trust me, Bob. You trusted me on board *Channel Dream* remember? And you've trusted me a few times since. But just supposing we did tell you all our plans, and someone'—he looked at Clark—'decided to nip over the side, the rest of us might find ourselves up the creek without a paddle.'

'Yes,' Evans muttered, also staring at Clark. 'I'm with you, Captain. You just tell us what you want us to do.'

'I want you to wait,' Maitland said. 'For just a little while longer. Twenty-four hours. The Japanese government has accepted the terms put forward by our friends. Tomorrow morning they'll get the message telling them just what we require in the way of gear and equipment. They have until tomorrow morning to raise the money and to get us off. The

operation to abandon this ship will commence the moment our friends ashore get their money' He looked at his watch 'This time tomorrow night we'll all be in the clear All we have to do is wait It's no worse than sitting out a typhoon And a lot more comfortable'

'Yes,' Evans said again He still watched Clark

'There's just one aspect of this that bothers me, Captain Maitland,' Sanding said 'This reliance we have to place on these agents of ours ashore They're the ones who are going to receive the money How do we know they'll even bother with us after that? Why should they care what happens to a bunch of Englishmen?'

'We can trust them,' Hilary Maitland said very quietly 'Otherwise I would not be here'

'And you want to forget that they are Japs and we are not,' Maitland said 'There's no nationalities involved in this We're partners' He looked around the room 'So now we wait Eddy, you take the first watch, with Mason Remember, no ship or boat is to approach within the half-mile limit Sanding, you and Evans have the second watch Porter, you and I'll have the third' His hand came out from behind his back, holding the pistol, and thrust it once again into his waistband

'And supposing a ship does enter the limit?' Clark demanded

'They won't,' Maitland assured him 'But if they should, call me Just keep your eye on that radar screen' He nodded to Hilary, who stepped out of the room before him

'There should have been a showdown then,' she whispered 'How can we trust Eddy? And he is unhappy about Joanne Did you notice how he never asked after her again?'

'Joanne is your problem Maybe if you hadn't revealed your dislike she wouldn't be quite such a problem' Maitland climbed the stairs to the master's accommodation deck How silent it was Up here even the hum of the generators was lost in the vastness of the ship There was no sound above the faint souging of the air conditioning

'I'm tense,' Hilary said

'I don't blame you' He glanced at her as he unlocked the door to his cabin 'Isn't it remarkable how none of them wondered how we mean to keep the ship going as a threat while we get away.'

'Yes' Hilary went inside, stared at herself in the mirror

'Are you having a change of mind?' Maitland asked He stood behind her, put his arms around her waist to bring her body back against his, felt the tension rippling through her, allowed his hands to slip upward and cup the breasts, naked beneath the kimono, hard-nippled and anxious 'All you have to do is say so, darling'

She watched him in the mirror 'And like the knight of old you'd come galloping to my rescue? John, you are a child Can you really see yourself growing old with me at your side?'

'No,' he said 'Maybe that's why I want to make sure you stay at my side'

She moved away, his fingers dragged around her breasts and under her armpits as he released her 'You can always wait,' she said 'I wish to talk about Eddy You are going to have to kill him now, John Can't you see that? And surely it was a mistake to put him and Mason on watch together? They'll be plotting something right now'

'I figure' Maitland went into the bedroom, lay across the double bed

'So?' Hilary stood in the doorway

'So we let him get on with it We let them both get on with it I don't trust Mason very far either'

'Are you crazy? Suppose'

'Suppose what? How would you go about it? Oh, you'd come down here and try to put us under arrest Eddy won't risk that He doesn't have the guts He is going to do two things First he will disconnect the wiring so that the ship is harmless And then he'll either slip over the side or, more likely, being Eddy, he'll call up that Coast Guard cutter and try bargaining Don't forget we have Joanne.'

'But with the wiring disconnected,' Hilary said, 'if he invites them in, that's it'

'I figure it would be, all right' Maitland heaved himself off the bed, went into the living room, flicked a switch beside his desk off and then on again 'I had Sanding fix up this buzzer If anyone lays a finger on either the wiring for the charges or the radio room door, it sounds off down here'

'And don't you think Sanding may warn Eddy of that?'

'No I trust Sanding But it does mean you and I will have to take turns at sleeping'

Hilary sat down on the settee, her legs seemed to give way and she flopped

'I don't understand you at all, John Not one bit Wouldn't it have been simpler to force his hand right away and shoot him?'

Maitland turned away from the desk to face her 'I suppose it would But it may not be necessary There's always a chance of that'

'And could it make any difference now? You've already killed a man You do understand that?'

'Yes,' Maitland said

'Something else,' Hilary said 'Supposing Eddy just called them in, John Supposing he lost his head and did that Would you blow the ship?'

Maitland shrugged 'Those are our instructions, aren't they?'

'I know our instructions, John Would you blow the ship with all of us still on it if they tried to take over?'

Maitland took off his shirt 'This is a hell of a time to ask me whether or not I'll go through with it, sweetheart I'm going to have a shower You take the first watch'

The tub was deep, set some four feet into the floor at the end of the room Here the water seethed with heat Beside the tub the bathroom floor was composed of wooden slats, and there was a cold water tap Here Cronin knelt after removing his

clothes and let Suiko play the cold shower over him To this moment they had not even kissed

And yet the lovemaking had already begun Suiko used the shower head as an extra hand Cronin knelt with his legs spread, his hands clasped behind his head He remembered that this was how she had made him kneel three years before She moved beside him, in front of him, and behind him, the shower head, attached to a flexible pipe, moving around and around, now spraying icy water at his face, now up and down his chest, now on his back, now held low and turned over to send the stream up between his legs

And every so often, smiling, she flicked the shower back so that it played on herself No comparison, really, between Suiko and Aya How often had he thought that during the past twenty-four hours Suiko, her magnificent hair piled on top of her head, was voluptuous

Now she soaped him Her hands came together and seemed immediately to be lost in a mass of bubbles These she applied first to his back, stroking down his ribs to caress his thighs before sliding gently around in front of his body, slipping under his arms and across his pointed nipples, moving between his legs

Slowly he lowered his arms, tried to control his shivering, tried to control the urge which seeped upwards from his belly It occurred to Cronin that he had not been quite so sober in years—and there was still the hot bath to come

The shower head was laid on the floor, the water still seeping out and disappearing through the wooden slats Suiko allowed her hand to be rinsed clear of soap and then thrust it into the steaming tub

'It is ready now,' she said It was the first time either of them had spoken in ten minutes

Cronin thrust one foot in and then the other He knew from experience that this was no time for hesitation and immediately lowered himself down into the near-boiling water which seemed twice as hot as it really was because of the chill

on his flesh His breath was gone, swept away in the heated embrace which closed around his belly As his body sank, steaming water lapped over the edge of the tub, mingled with the cold flow from the shower head and disappeared through the floor But the level in the tub remained as constant as the heat, from the tap at the side a constant stream of hot water replaced any which might have been displaced

Cronin sat This was the privilege of the European, given sufficient height Most Japanese knelt in the bath to avoid drowning But sitting, he achieved the ultimate in relaxation There was no longer any feeling in his body from the neck down He could allow his arms to float, while his legs, just visible through the clear water, seemed to be totally divorced from his being Only his head remained clear, seething with thoughts now, for the heat was comforting where the cold had been merely paralysing

He watched Suiko, still kneeling as she washed the soap from her own body He gazed at the rivulets of white foam running down her thighs and between her breasts, moving through the clinging black mat that covered her groin, dripping between her legs She shivered, and the soft brown of her flesh glistened

She sat on the edge of the bath, allowed her legs to slip over the edge, let her body follow them, slowly disappearing beneath the surface at the opposite end to himself She knelt He could feel her knees against his own legs, and her body rested lightly on his toes Like him, only her head was visible

'You are happy now, Bill?' she asked softly

'Getting that way,' Cronin confessed

She smiled 'You are still impatient Have we not the entire night before us? It is still very early, and you need to rest Is not the bath soothing to you?'

'Yes' There was an understatement And suddenly there was nothing he wanted to do for the rest of his life but sit here, or there, or anywhere, and look at Suiko's smile
'Suiko . '

She shook her head very gently 'No more apologies, Bill No more explanations There should be no explanations between friends'

'I'd like to marry you, Suiko Maybe with you to run my bath every night I'd even drink less' He smiled, his cheeks pink with a combination of heat and embarrassment 'I meant to ask you three years ago, but I'm a terrible coward'

Suiko leaned forward, her shoulders parting the water like the prow of a ship *Eastern Dream* What a perfect description for a perfect woman

She kissed him, allowed her tongue gently to circle the line of his lips, flick his own, and withdraw His hands, reaching for her body, were given the chance to do no more than slide across the slippery smoothness of her breasts, feel the touch of her caressing his palms, before she was away again

'You do not mean that, Bill'

He watched her climb out of the bath He thought that of all his memories of Suiko, the memory of her standing on the edge of the bath, her body a glistening paradise, while water drained down her legs, would be the most enchanting

'Believe me, sweetheart, I have meant it with more certainty every day of the past three years'

She wrapped herself in the warm towel, moved up and down once or twice while the moisture was absorbed into the cloth from her body She appeared to be thinking Words bubbled into his mouth and he choked them back He had said all that was necessary Suiko surely knew all that was necessary about herself and about himself The decision was hers His heart seemed to have slowed To think that he had almost allowed this to slip through his fingers He had never really permitted his imagination to work before on this subject But now he could And now he wanted to Suiko walking down Regent Street with him at her side on a December morning Wearing boots and a fur And some kind of fur hat on her head Carrying an umbrella Oh, definitely A small rolled multicoloured folding thing And of course spending a for-

tune Suiko sitting in a bar with him at her side No, no bars Not ever again With Suiko he would not need bars Suiko and Cronin going to a show and holding hands Cronin waking in the morning to watch Suiko making coffee No more hang-ups Not with Suiko

She stood at the edge of the bath, the towel removed and her body once again firm-textured and dry She held another towel waiting for him

He got out of the tub, and the towel was wrapped around him Her fingers stroked him gently through the thick cloth and then she was away again, moving into the bedroom, her body a kaleidoscope of brilliant light and irresistible shadow

'If you feel like it,' he said, 'you can stand me on the top step and push.'

She smiled She knelt in front of her mirror and slowly released her hair She had no need of a dressing gown when her hair was loose, she could have opened the front door to the postman and remained perfectly modest 'I would like to marry you, Bill'

She was watching him in the mirror His heart did a tremendous upward somersault and then an equally abrupt descent into his belly There was something about the way she had said it

'But there's a but'

'I do not think so,' she said 'Not from me I would want you to be sure It is a big step'

'I have never been quite so sure of anything in my whole life,' Cronin said He was dry now He draped the towel across the heated rail and stepped into the room Suiko still watched him in the mirror and then half turned and, perhaps without thinking, flicked the switch on the television set A Japanese reaction No room is complete without a working television set twenty-four hours a day.

It warmed up quickly too The announcer was speaking in Japanese, but there could be no question as to what he was talking about The screen was filled with a map of Kyushu on

which Nagasaki and the Amakusa Islands and Kumamoto were most clearly marked, Nagasaki harbour with a red cross. And as the announcer spoke, a tide of red spread outward from the great seaport, across the sound and around the delightful islands with their five bridges, obliterating in its path the pearl fisheries and the seafood colonies and the beaches, clouding northward in search of the huge, vulnerable, and almost uncleanable area of the Inland Sea.

The announcer let the tide spread. His voice had altered its timbre, and the screen moved into a close-up of Nagasaki itself and its surrounding areas. There was a flicker of light as the harbour glowed and the glow spread outward over the city. They had marked the more outstanding attractions—the great shipyards, even the Thomas Glover House, from the portico of which Madame Butterfly gazed with patient resignation across the sea in search of her Pinkerton. Madame Butterfly and the quaintly European cottage set in the heart of Japanese architecture and culture had survived the blast of the atomic bomb. According to expert opinion, apparently, it would not survive the eruption of *Eastern Dream*.

'Now that's going to make the people down there stay real cool,' Cronin said bitterly. 'I sometimes think special effects should be banned from television.'

'I do not think she will explode like that,' Suiko said.

'She may not explode,' Cronin said. 'But that pollution tide could be real enough. What the devil!' For the cameras had moved from the studio mockups to another room, and he found himself gazing at the face of Jimmy Dawson. A haggard Jimmy Dawson, staring at the camera lens with the expression of a man who has recently been sandbagged. And behind Dawson was Nikky Christian and young Clive Henry, looking equally distressed.

'Christ almighty,' Cronin said. 'They've got ashore. Listen.' He dropped to his knees beside her. 'You must marry me, Suiko.'

Her head turned. Her eyes were too black to fathom. But

he could understand the pressure of her fingers, the soft smile on her mouth 'If you wish me, Bill I would be very happy'

'Then what am I worrying about? Except Johnny Maitland I must go Now'

Her forehead creased 'Now? The man says those are members of the crew of *Eastern Dream* who have been released by the terrorists Is that not good?'

'I hope so Is he giving any information about where they are being taken?'

Suiko shook her head

'He says they are being put up at a hotel in Nagasaki for tonight'

'Then I have to get down there and see them'

'Tonight?' Her frown deepened

'Your police chief, or whatever he is—Peter Ikeda—do you know him?'

She nodded 'He is a brilliant man Although he may not look it But he is not the chief of police'

'I believe you, darling But sometimes it is better to be dull than brilliant He means to take *Eastern Dream* by storm sometime tomorrow morning, just before the deadline'

Suiko's mouth formed a round O 'Will that not be very dangerous?'

'There's an understatement And I allowed myself to be talked into it As you say, I must have been half asleep Thank God for your bath Can I use the telephone?'

'Of course But if Captain Ikeda is not meaning to make his move until tomorrow morning'

Cronin had already reached for his jacket, found the hotel brochure Nimura had given him, and was dialling. 'I've got to find out what's happening down there, darling, and Jimmy Dawson will know He may even be able to give me some idea how to stop it Certainly he'll be able to let us know the exact situation on board and how many men Maitland has with him Hello Hello? I want to speak with Miss Nimura Miss

Aya Nimura 'I don't know her room number.' He waited, his fingers drumming on the table

Suiko began to dress, pulling on the endless white underwear that keeps a kimono warm out of doors in the winter 'Who is Miss Nimura?' she asked quietly

'Just a girl A niece of your boss, in fact And my temporary secretary as well It's a small world Aya?'

'Um,' Aya said 'Where on earth have you been, Mr Cronin? Captain Ikeda has been on the telephone Did you know that thirty-seven members of the crew have been released? He is obtaining a list of their names'

'Has he gone down there?'

'He is going,' she said 'He was hoping you would go with him But when I told him you hadn't come in yet, he just laughed'

'I tell you what you do, Aya I have a strong idea that Ikeda may be thinking of pulling something tonight and just wanted me out of the way Get dressed and telephone the airport and find out if that plane I chartered is still standing by I want it ready in an hour And then grab a cab and come on down to Rappongo It's the apartment house next to Joe's Bar I'll be waiting downstairs in fifteen minutes Fifteen minutes, sweetheart, and do remember it's February'

'Oh, sure,' she said resignedly 'Just what I've always dreamed of, spending a freezing February night floating around Japanese skies'

'Well, get on with it Fifteen minutes And that plane had better have its engines ticking over' He put down the receiver 'You're not angry?'

'How could I be angry?' Suiko asked. 'But I do not understand the haste'

She wrapped herself in her kimono

'I think he is going to make his move tonight Especially if he can get some information out of Dawson and Christian'

Suiko nodded She tied her sash around her waist 'And you hope to be able to stop him?'

'I shouldn't think I'll be able to But I want to be there If there is trouble it's my responsibility'

'Then I will drive you to the airport I would like to come with you'

'With—It's freezing out there'

She smiled 'It will not be freezing in Nagasaki And my car has a heater It is in a garage only a few minutes from here You get dressed, Bill, and I will fetch the car When your Miss Nimura arrives we'll pay off the taxi and all go together'

Her face was composed, relaxed even But not smiling Cronin caught her arm as she went to the door

'I've spent my entire life ruining my relationships with women Believe me, darling, I'm going to marry you and I'm going to make you the happiest little woman in all the world I'm going to give up all my bad habits and you and I are just going to sit down and love each other There's a promise But I was sent here to do a job of work I just couldn't sleep easy, not even beside you, if I didn't do the job first'

The smile was back 'Of course I know that, Bill I'm sorry I am not angry, truly Just disappointed But as you say, we have our entire lives together' She reached up to kiss him on the mouth 'And as you say, you have work to do I am proud to help you I will get the car Come down in five minutes'

The door closed behind her Cronin stood quite still for a moment, gazing after her He had a peculiar sense of unreality that it should all have been so easy That three years of frustrated desire and accumulating guilt should have been swept away with such consummate ease

And that she should have waited That life could be so unbelievably wonderful

He knotted his tie, slung his coat over his shoulder, opened the door, and allowed it to close gently behind him He pressed the Down button on the elevator, gazed at the numbers The light glowed at G and remained there He pressed the button again, and nothing happened He glanced

at his watch Suiko had said five minutes, and he had already taken ten Damnation She'd be sitting on the freezing street And by now Aya might be there as well He wanted to be there when they met

He ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time He reached the next landing, turned for the stairs again, and checked as a man started up towards him Now that was strange The man had definitely *started* to move as Cronin reached the landing

He stepped backwards, his instincts still dulled by the comfort of the bath The man drew level, nodded, and turned sharply Cronin's hands came up protectively, but at the same moment he heard another sound behind him

CHAPTER SEVEN

HILARY MAITLAND SLEPT Still wearing her kimono, she lay on the settee in the living room facing the locked door, her head towards the desk and the warning microphone The rifle lay on the carpet beside her and the kimono had flopped away from one ankle Her eyes were closed and her mouth was slightly open, and she breathed with surprising loudness Her dark hair had flopped across her face, and the strands moved with each breath She looked relaxed and at peace She was exhausted

Maitland used his cordless shaver, strolling up and down the cabin He was restless, aware that this night was going to be the crunch of the whole affair And neither his movement nor the hum of the shaver disturbed her She had managed to fall asleep while officially the one on watch But for more than two days now she had hardly slept at all She had kept herself going on her vicious hatred of all things human And on Jo Clark God alone knew what condition Jo was in now She was Hilary's prize and Hilary had taken full advantage of it

And yet now she slept like a babe But he remembered her sleeping after the cockfights in Bangkok She had been exhausted then too The exhaustion of excitement

He put down the shaver, stroked his chin, absently gazed at himself in the mirror, and hurriedly looked away again He wished she was awake He needed her to be awake, all the time, to be constantly at his side, constantly bolstering his own determination to hate He wondered if she suspected him, how much he understood He had been acting or rehearsing this part, in private and for Hilary, for so very long that it seemed natural to him now As long as he never stopped to think And now he was doing just that

Because suddenly he no longer hated. Not even the Japanese He had been told endless tales of the little men who were savaging the noble Chinese all through his childhood He had been conditioned for war, and he had gone to war, happily and unsuccessfully He could still remember the impotent rage which had seethed in his belly when the skipper had announced in that dry-as-dust tone of his 'Sorry, chaps, I'm going to have to take her up' He had wanted to say, No, let's die right here Let's finish it now He had shouted that and been slapped across the face by the chief petty officer.

After that, hating had been an important part of surviving It had given him food and drink where there had been none to obtain Hating, and Marge Marge had made the business of surviving seem important, and afterwards she had made the business of living to succeed seem important too He wondered why He could do that now She had not been beautiful and had not been compulsively sexual She had not been inhibited either And some of her sweetness had rubbed off on the long thin hate machine that was her husband Everything he had done for the rest of her life had been for her He had taken risks because he had known Marge approved Marge believed life was there for the living, for the acceptance of risks, for the steady move forward and upward, for the refusal to accept that obstacles were immovable And

eventually for leaving with good grace Marge had never viewed that prospect with any more dismay than she had viewed any obstacle When Dr Manley had told them what was inevitable, Maitland for the first and only time in his life had felt tears in his eyes, they had been tears as much of self-pity as of concern for Marge herself

Marge had actually smiled It was an event she had long known to be inevitable, and for just that long she had been prepared for it

But with that information the cloud of ambitious tranquillity which had hung over Maitland for so many years had been dispersed like mist before a sudden dry wind He had felt the true hatred begin to churn within his belly all over again, a hatred which had included World Oil, and even Alistair Michaelson

By the time he had buried Marge he had hated her as well And when she had been buried he had gone on a fortnight's binge which had allowed every vein of anger that ran through his body to have its fullest expression Perhaps he had been out of his mind Yes, he thought, he had been out of his mind for that fortnight And ever since Because that fortnight had ended with Hilary

The remarkable thing was that then he had hated Hilary as well She had merely meant change He had stood in the middle of the hot, stinking, excited crowd around the cockpit and watched the two bantams tearing feathers and flesh from each other while the blood flew and the crowd snarled, because there had been nothing human left in that room, and his attention had suddenly been taken by the sight of the white girl kneeling opposite him, closer to the fighting than he was, her mouth slightly open to reveal her teeth, her nostrils flared, her fists clenched, her body isolated by the heavy dark hair which lay on her shoulders After a week of hiring native girls she had reminded him of what he was, at least racially And when, as the weaker cock had subsided to the floor, a gaping hole where its neck had been, she had at

last raised her head and stared at him, he knew that she too was for the having. Even then he had also known that this could be no one-night stand. There had been a fleck of hot blood on the back of her hand and she had raised her arm to suck it clean.

He had not suspected then that she had planned the meeting. And when she had told him with amazing frankness only a few days later, it had not mattered. It had even seemed a huge joke. Because *she* had not known who *he* was. He was an officer from the World Oil fleet who had gone on a bender, and she had wanted to get close to an officer in the World Oil fleet. Correction: she had been instructed to get close to an officer of the World Oil fleet. She had thought herself lucky in not having to work on some eager beaver who had no more than a couple of hours ashore. With Maitland she could build things up.

He had liked the sound of that. By then he could no more have envisaged life without Hilary than a few months earlier he had found it possible to envisage life without Marge, quite apart from the pleasure of possessing such a remarkable secret. But the relationship had been different from any he had ever experienced. Not merely in bed, although it had started there. No more slightly amused interest combined with an almost motherly acceptance of his various desires, here was a passion, a desire to hurt and be hurt, to be exhausted and to exhaust, to conquer and be conquered, all at the same time, which matched his own, and which was combined with that so fascinating modesty when she was not actually in bed.

But far more than that, from the first night she had fed his hatred by word and by deed and by insinuation. Hatred of authority, hatred of civilization, hatred of politeness, hatred of rules and regulations, hatred specifically of employer and employee, and hatred above all of money and power and the people and nations which controlled them. And hatred of Japan.

This last alone was in Hilary. He. He had known fro

the beginning that she was humouring him, and had been sure of it when she had introduced him to Yoshiyue Kanauchi

Kanauchi was disturbing, not only because he was Japanese, but because he so obviously did not hate. His imperturbable smile seemed to extend on either side of his horn-rimmed glasses, his glasses themselves appeared opaque, which made his eyes next to impossible to see and certainly impossible to understand. The world had obviously been Kanauchi's oyster, and the world included Hilary. Perhaps this was the most disturbing thing of all. Hilary had been taken—while on some hippie-style hitch-hiking tour she had been making through the East—and been absorbed, digested, and regurgitated. Kanauchi's creature. The idea of Kanauchi kneeling between Hilary's legs was about the most repulsive thought Maitland had ever entertained. So he had immediately been conditioned to top Kanauchi, in every field. It had not been difficult.

'Money,' Kanauchi had said, leaning across the scarred table, the little cup of saké held between thumb and forefinger of each hand. 'Power Repression. These are their gods. There is no pleasure, no light, and above all no honour in subscribing to such a system. We shall destroy it. A man must make his own fortune, his own laws, and live by his own honour, or he is not a man.'

'Sure,' Maitland had said, holding out his cup for Hilary to pour. 'Sure.'

'So we would like you to join us,' Hilary had said. 'You can be of great help to us.'

'Sure,' Maitland had said, enjoying the growing joke. 'What do you want me to do?'

'You work on board the big tankers,' Kanauchi had said, becoming comically conspiratorial. 'These go to Yokohama. You could strike a blow against my people and against your employers all at the same time.'

'A bomb,' Hilary had whispered. 'Maybe in the engine room. And maybe another in one of the wing tanks. You'd

wreck the ship and fill Tokyo Bay with oil Wouldn't that be something?'

And Maitland had laughed It was the first belly laugh he had had in over a year, and now when he thought about it it was the last he had had in two years And when he had finished laughing he had done the talking And they had listened

The faintest sound came through the telltale microphone Only a tickle, the nervous scratch of someone thumbing the radio-telephone switch preparatory to sending

Maitland moved across the room, touched Hilary on the shoulder She was awake in an instant, her eyes opening and her hand reaching for the rifle at the same moment

'Let's take a look,' Maitland said. 'And we'll have Sanding along You stay on deck'

She nodded silently, went outside, and stood just inside the bulkhead door next to the ladder leading down to the lower deck

Maitland went down the inside steps to the officers' accommodation deck, once again marvelled at the silence of the ship It was a still night in the bowels of a vessel this size, not even the breeze could affect him down here And the murmur of the generators seemed farther away than ever, although actually he was closer to the engine room now

He tapped on the door and then opened it 'Mr Sanding?'

The light came on and the radio operator sat up, fair hair tousled 'Sir?'

'Someone is using the radio equipment, Mr Sanding I'm going up there now, and I'd like you along'

Sanding gazed at him for a moment, obviously trying to get his brain working, and then nodded and reached for his clothes

'And bring your gun, Mr Sanding,' Maitland said

He climbed the stairs again, the young man at his heels. Hilary remained just inside the bulkhead door, watching the decks and the ships, fewer in number now, and the shore

'Anything?'

She shook her head

Maitland stepped out on to the deck and went up the outside ladder, glancing down once to make sure that Sanding was still following him. The breeze had dropped, but it was a cold night and he had to stifle a shiver. He checked as his eyes came level with the deck of the bridge wing. The door to the wheelhouse was closed, as was the door to the radio shack, but in both lights glowed and above them all the radar scanner was revolving. Maitland stepped on to the deck, moved in against the bulkhead, and waited for Sanding to join him. They ignored the wheelhouse itself and walked along the line of port holes until they reached the radio shack. Inside, Eddy Clark sat before the huge bank of glowing lights and dials, his back to the door, the earphones on his head. He was speaking in a low voice.

Maitland sucked air into his lungs and opened the door.

Clark turned. Now in this last crisis of his life he regained all his normal fluidity. His movements were instinctive because he knew that there could be no alternative now. He rose from the table still turning, slipped sideways towards the shelter of the chair, and picked up his pistol beside the microphone all in the same long action. He looked less surprised perhaps that he should have been interrupted than that both Maitland and Sanding should have squeezed their triggers at the same time. He raised his own weapon, and the bullet from Maitland's pistol all but missed him. It flicked his right shoulder where his chest had been seconds earlier, splitting the blue serge of his jacket with a sudden spurt of red, throwing the arm itself outwards and causing his own shot, for his fingers continued to squeeze, to scream into the steel bulkhead and ricochet around the cabin with a deafening screech.

Sanding was more accurate, more alive to what the first officer was likely to do. His pistol had been directed to the left, and the bullet entered Clark's right armpit as he fell away from the chair. His entire chest seemed to explode and his

body was thrown backwards so that it seemed suspended for a moment before it struck the deck

'Oh, Christ!' Sanding said. He had not actually meant to kill anyone

The radio was spluttering

'Tell them to keep clear,' Maitland snapped. 'Make sure of it.'

He turned to the doorway as he heard a foot on the deck outside and dropped to his knees. A bullet whined into the cabin above him, and once again the ricochet reverberations echoed across the night. Maitland returned fire, squeezing his own trigger twice. The door to the navigation bridge slammed shut and there was silence.

On the bridge. Noise drifted towards the tanker from across the bay, a sudden hubbub of sound, even some music, as if the watchers were engaged in a private celebration.

And from below, Hilary called, 'John? Are you all right, Johnny?'

'Be careful,' Maitland shouted. 'Mason is on the loose, and he's armed. Raise Porter and Evans.'

'They're here,' Hilary said. Her voice dropped to an indistinct murmur as she gave the stewards their orders. The lower deck was secure.

Sanding shut down the set. 'I warned them,' he said.

'So get out the other door and close on him,' Maitland said. 'I don't want him messing about with the controls on the bridge.'

Sanding hesitated, then moved across the radio shack to the inner door.

'Together,' Maitland said. 'One on each side.' Cautiously he stepped outside, keeping close to the bulkhead. The wheelhouse door remained closed. But from the port side there came another explosion from Sanding's pistol, followed by two more rapid shots.

'Oh, Christ,' Sanding called again, and his voice had changed.

Maitland turned and ran through the radio shack, out of the corridor at the inner end, and through the bulkhead door at the back of the bridge. Sanding was on his hands and knees, cursing and crying.

'My thigh,' he wailed, his voice thick with saliva and vomit. 'Oh, Christ, my thigh.'

'Where's Mason?' Maitland asked.

'I think he means to get over the side,' Sanding gasped. 'He was on the bridge wing, and when he saw me he turned and ran aft.'

Maitland stepped outside, ran for the after ladder. He didn't blame Mason for not going over from the wing itself, it was a hell of a long way down to the sea. But it was also a long way aft to the quarterdeck.

He dropped to his hands and knees at the ladder, looked down on the officers' leisure deck, the waters of the swimming pool sparkled behind the huge oval base of the funnel, which towered above him now, the glowing globe painted in phosphorescent colour. From where he stood he oversaw the whole of this deck, except for immediately behind the funnel, and he could also see the ladder leading down. He could not see the crew's narrower recreation deck beyond, but below that the quarterdeck was empty and exposed. There was no sign of the quartermaster, but Maitland was sure he was still on board.

'John?' Hilary shouted from forward of the bridge. 'What was that shooting? Did you get him?'

'No,' Maitland called. 'Listen to me. Sanding has been hurt. Send Evans aft with a rifle to help me and you and Porter get up on to the navigation bridge. Hurry now. I think his thigh is broken.'

He watched Mason leave the shelter of the funnel and hurtle for the ladder. He fired twice, but Mason did not stop running and a moment later he was gone, sliding down the steps to the crew's recreation deck.

Maitland went down the bridge ladder, raced across the leisure deck, looked down at the recreation deck just as Mason

reached the next steps Panting for breath, the captain stood still, legs spread, his pistol held in both hands, and pumped three more bullets into the night. Then the hammer clicked on an empty chamber He stuck the pistol into his belt and ran down again, checked at the bottom Did it matter if Mason got away? Christian and Dawson would have informed the authorities how many men remained on board and from the point of view of an assault the difference between four men and a woman and six men and a woman was not relevant

Maitland frowned and slowly moved forward He had never doubted his personal courage before He had not doubted it just now, when he had been taking on the pair of them But the memory of Harry Large continued to haunt him He had not been able to make himself kill Large without Hilary to prod him, and just now he had not shot to kill Eddy Clark So, you do not kill your friends But there was no friendship in this business There was no friendship between Hilary and himself even Would there ever be, supposing they both got off the ship with a million apiece and a guaranteed passage to Brazil? Hilary had always wanted to visit Brazil And if she didn't like it, the way things were going in south-east Asia, it wouldn't be very long before they'd be able to return to Thailand and the cockfights

He thought they both wanted to return to Thailand more than anything else in the world

But would they be friends then?

And anyway, that was pure wishful thinking Kanauchi had ordained otherwise

He reached the ladder and looked down, for the moment forgetting that he was exposed and silhouetted against the brightness emanating from the glowing funnel But he was in no danger Mason was hit Maitland watched the quartermaster staggering across the deck towards the stern, reaching for the rail like an exhausted marathon runner He would make the rail all right, Maitland calculated But he would never make the shore Not with the blood draining from his

body at every step, leaving great dark splotches on the clean decks

Mason reached the rail, he held on to it with both hands, gazing down at the water. Even from the quarterdeck, the lowest of the outside decks available, the sea was a hell of a long way away, and the nearest vessel not less than half a mile off, although the cutter was now turning towards the tanker Maitland straightened. Something would have to be done about that.

A rifle exploded from beneath him. Mason had raised one leg into the air, resting it on the lower rail as if about to launch himself into the blackness. Now he checked, standing very still for a moment, half turning his body as if to look over his shoulder before, with quite startling suddenness, collapsing straight downwards. His knees and thighs gave way and then his spine also seemed to crumble, and he lay in a huddle on the deck against the rail.

'I got him,' cried Evans, running out of the crew's quarters brandishing his rifle. 'I got the bastard.'

Maitland opened his mouth and then closed it again. 'Good shooting, Mr Evans,' he called. 'You'd better roll him over the side.'

He turned, climbed the ladders to the navigation bridge. Sanding lay on the deck under the lights. Porter was dragging off his pants and underpants and Hilary Maitland knelt beside him, bandages in her hands, gasping as she saw the thigh bone had been splintered.

'Oh, Christ,' Sanding moaned. 'Oh, Christ.' Tears rolled down his face.

'Give him a sedative,' Maitland said. 'Quickly.' He stared at the Coast Guard cutter. It was speeding up and down, gradually coming closer.

He went into the radio room, picked up the mike. 'Coast Guard, Coast Guard, Coast Guard,' he said. '*Eastern Dream, Eastern Dream, Eastern Dream* calling Coast Guard. Keep off. Do you read me? Keep off. We are still in control.'

He released the switch, stood up, stared through the window, watched the patrol boat withdrawing again

Hilary stood in the doorway 'And then there were five Or should it be four and a half? God, I want to vomit'

And she had once sucked a cock's blood off her hand

'You don't look so good,' Maitland agreed 'I think you'd better go to bed We'll manage up here'

She nodded 'I'd like to do that But before I lie down I think I'd beter go and tell Joanne that Eddy is dead'

The entire sky opened wide, yawning black Cronin was being given a glimpse into that eternity that lies beyond even the concept of heaven Then it closed again suddenly and without warning and his head had somehow been left inside the aperture No doubt he groaned, to him it sounded like a long scream of agony But before it was properly out there was another smashing blow and then another

The rippling head agony was accentuated by the movement He was stretched out on the floor of a vehicle, and there was no carpet Not, he suspected, that it would have mattered if there had been His wrists and ankles were free Occasionally he banged against a row of seats He was in a minibus, he figured, which was travelling at some speed

He started to move his left arm, to bring his wrist and his watch up before his face, when a shoe descended on to his shoulder, pressing it to the floor He had not noticed the legs before Mainly because he hadn't risked opening his eyes Now he discovered that there were three pairs of legs, and he suspected at least one of them belonged to the man who had hit him He closed his eyes once more

There had been two men Correction two people From here on, supposing he was ever going anywhere again of his own free will, facts were all that were going to matter There had been a man in front of him and there had been another person waiting behind him The operative word was waiting They had clobbered him Why? That was simple enough.

Maitland's friends did not want Cronin going down to Nagasaki. He supposed that was a compliment.

But they had been waiting. Only two people in all the world except Suiko had known where he was, and they were both named Nimura. But to imagine that Ken Nimura could be in league with a terrorist group to fleece his own company of fifty million dollars, and his own country of fifty million more, was impossible.

So that left Aya.

Unless there had been a tail on him all the way from the airport. That was certainly possible. But that was returning to supposition.

Three years. He had thought on the plane that three years was the link in all this business. Three years ago Marge had died, and Maitland had met Hilary. Three years ago Maitland had been given command of *Eastern Dream*, and had started recruiting his men, among whom had been Eddy Clark. Three years ago *Western Dream* had been ordered, and Alex Brogan had been informed that he would be getting the command. Not Eddy.

And three years ago Aya Nimura had started work for World Oil.

In which case, Billy boy, he thought, you are definitely getting past it, the girl had you completely fooled from start to finish. Or had she? He had been bothered by so much about her. Her willingness to flit from job to job within the company. Her inconsistent views of life and morality. Her sudden anxiety to do whatever he wanted. Her insistence upon accompanying him to Japan. He had allowed his ego to get out of hand, and it appeared as if he was going to pay for it.

Suddenly he was sweating. For where did all this leave Suiko? She had just gone for her car. If they had got to her first he would not have heard it. On the other hand, why should they have wanted to hurt her at all? It would merely have increased their risk and no one could have known that she intended to accompany him to the airport.

But suppose she had already returned, or they had been afraid that she would return before they could get Cronin out of the building?

He wondered why he wasn't afraid for himself. He was too dazed still. But it might be time for a little apprehension, the minibus was stopping.

And suddenly the door at the rear had been opened, and the bus was filled with freezing wind. So he was no longer down on the coastal plain. But they couldn't have driven him so very far.

'Get up, Mr Cronin,' someone said in English.

He thrust his palms downward, the restraining foot having been removed from his back, pushed himself up to his hands and knees, and then got to his feet. He turned very slowly and carefully. He didn't want to excite anybody; his head was still opening and shutting like the mouth of a starving alligator.

One man was beside him inside the bus and two more waited outside. In the total darkness it was impossible to ascertain more than that they were all somewhat smaller than himself and therefore presumably Japanese, and that they all wore topcoats and slouch hats. They also carried pistols. Someone must have given them an entirely erroneous impression that Cronin was the heroic type.

Just as slowly and carefully he climbed down, breathing deeply.

It was a hell of a lot colder outside, and he had lost his topcoat at the apartment house. But at least it was a little brighter in the open and he was able to look around him. He stood close to the shore of a lake which was entirely surrounded by mountains, jagged peaks reared into the sky on every side. The far side of the lake was invisible, but he thought he could make out mountains over there as well, and some of them were blanketed with snow. In any event, he was apparently going to be allowed a closer look at the water, because there was a motorboat waiting beside a rough dock.

movement, their captor overboard, and the launch would whip away into the night. Perhaps they did not know that Cronin was a yachtsman, and this was their vital mistake.

He sat down on the seat beside Suiko. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

She nodded, hesitantly. She did not really expect to remain all right.

'But what happened?'

She turned to look at him as the rest of the men got on board. For just a moment her face was illuminated by the glare of the flashlight, her eyes were wide, her cheeks paler than usual. And perhaps there was a bruise on her cheek. He could not be sure. Then she looked away again, and the launch was moving out into the lake. The temperature was near freezing. Cronin put his arm around Suiko's shoulders, hugged her close to him. Warmth spread from her body into his. But still she was stiff. She was afraid.

The man with the glasses sat facing them. 'You are William Archer Cronin,' he said, 'And you are head of security in World Oil.' His voice was faint over the growl of the diesel.

'And you?' Cronin asked with a confidence he was a long way from feeling.

'My name is Kanauchi,' the man said.

'And you're the big wheel?'

Kanauchi shrugged. 'I am handling the negotiations, yes. Now tell me why you were sent to Japan. What can there be for you to do here?'

Cronin's turn to shrug. 'My boss felt it might be a good idea to have a man on the spot.'

Kanauchi smiled. 'You are lying. I know much about you, Mr Cronin. And about your reason for being here. You mean to get on board *Eastern Dream*.'

'Whatever for?' Cronin asked. 'Didn't you listen to the broadcast?'

'I listened,' Kanauchi said. 'And they said what I expected them to say. But I do not believe what they said. I do not

believe they mean to pay the money, or if they do, I believe they mean in some way to trick us. And I know they mean to get on board the tanker, and if possible disarm it. With your help.'

'Over my dead body, you mean,' Cronin said and wished he had chosen a different metaphor.

Kanauchi continued to smile. 'You are against this plan. Yes. You are a sensible man. It would be very dangerous. We are not bluffing, you know. But Ikeda is not a sensible man. He believes that he is doing the right thing, as long as he believes that, he will do it, regardless of the consequences. Men like that are the most dangerous of all.'

'And do you not believe you are doing the right thing?' Cronin asked. He felt Suiko move against his shoulder.

'Oh, yes,' Kanauchi said. 'I am also a dangerous man, Mr Cronin. But it is you we are discussing. I would like you to tell me what Captain Ikeda is planning.'

'My trouble is he hasn't told *me* yet,' Cronin said.

'Mr Cronin,' Kanauchi said, 'I wish you to believe me when I say that should anything go wrong my agents on board your ship are prepared to blow her up. They will probably lose their lives, and they will probably cause the death of a great many other people. They will also do untold damage to the coast of Kyushu, and perhaps even farther afield. And they will destroy your new tanker. Beside all that, one life is not so very important. Now please. You spent over an hour speaking with Captain Ikeda, earlier this evening, and just now you were making urgent preparations to fly down to Nagasaki. I know that you would prefer merely to pay the ransom, and not risk any bloodshed or property destruction, therefore, by telling me what the police plan to do, surely you will be serving yourself as well as helping us. I am appealing to you as a reasonable man, Mr Cronin.' He looked over his shoulder as the launch slowed. 'Think about what I am saying for a few minutes.'

The launch was now almost stopped and was coming in to

another bank. There was no means of deciding in which direction they had been travelling, but presumably this was again some part of the mainland. They were, in fact, approaching a shingle beach which disappeared between cliffs into a ravine.

'We will go ashore here,' Kanauchi said. 'I am afraid it will mean getting our feet wet. But you may carry Miss Asano if you wish.'

The boat bobbed gently on the little wavelets whipped by the breeze, although the engine continued to hum in neutral. One of the men and then another dropped over the side with a splash.

They went ashore and turned to face the launch, holding flashlights which played over the water and the boat.

Cronin looked over the side. 'That looks mighty cold,' he said.

'It is February. What would you expect, Mr Cronin? Come now, we must hurry.'

Cronin sat on the gunwale, hesitated for a moment, and then slipped forward into the water. He felt that he should be thinking harder than ever before in his life, but his brain kept going around in circles, beginning with the thesis that this must all be a nightmare, that he had fallen asleep in Suiko's arms and would soon awaken. In any event, thought was not practical in this water. It gripped him just above the knees and already all feeling had gone from his feet.

'Now you, Miss Asano,' Kanauchi said.

Suiko stood up, stood at the gunwale. Cronin held up his hands. She dropped her feet over the side and leaned forward. He caught her under the armpits. His fingers slipped on the silk of the kimono, and then he cradled her in his arms. A moment later he was wading towards the shore, inhaling her scent, feeling her breath on his face.

'Bill,' she whispered. 'Tell them what Ikeda means to do, please. Otherwise they will kill us.'

'I don't *know* what he means to do,' Cronin said. 'I don't

think he does himself yet. We were going to plan it all tomorrow morning.'

Her head turned and she stared at him. 'But you must convince this man.'

'Yes,' Cronin said. He waded clear of the water, stumbled on to the beach, and set her down. Other men splashed behind him and the engine gathered power as the launch moved away from the shore.

'Come,' Kanauchi said. He himself took Suiko's arm and half pushed her up the sloping shingle. Two of the other men walked beside Cronin, and a third followed.

They walked for ten minutes while the ravine twisted so that they lost sight of the water behind them. It was even colder now, for the breeze had stiffened and cut through Cronin's suit as if it had been made of tissue paper, while his feet remained huge blocks of ice. But now they left the shingle and walked on grass, and in front of them he could see the outline of a house. A dog barked, and there was a plaintive lowing from another building which lay beyond the first.

Kanauchi pushed open a gate, and they entered the farmyard, the air smelled stale, as it came from the cow houses and the chicken runs before drifting down the ravine. By the house, at one side, waited a woman and a man, both considerably older than any of the men from the launch. They exchanged words in Japanese with Kanauchi, and then the screens slid aside to allow them into the house.

'You will take off your shoes,' Kanauchi said.

'I've been dying to do that.' Cronin stepped out of his shoes and felt even colder, but there was a brazier glowing inside the room. He followed Suiko inside. She had also removed her shoes, and her white socks were dripping water. Again she avoided looking at him.

Kanauchi and the three men entered behind them, and the screen slid into place. The room itself was bare of furniture; there was not even a television set or a vase of flowers, which was disturbingly inappropriate.

Kanauchi gave an order, and one of the men opened a screen in the far wall, revealing an inner room. He in turn spoke to Suiko. She hesitated, glanced at Cronin, and then stepped inside. Cronin went to follow her.

'No,' Kanauchi said. 'You will stay here, Mr Cronin.'

Cronin hesitated, but Suiko was already inside the inner room with two of the men, and the screen was sliding into place. 'Just what do you have in mind?'

'That depends on you, Mr Cronin,' Kanauchi seated himself cross-legged on the tatami mat by the door. The remaining man sat against the far wall, took an automatic pistol from his pocket, and pointed it at Cronin. 'So,' Kanauchi said. 'Why don't you sit down?'

Cronin listened, the sound from beyond the screen was impossible to identify. He sighed and sat down, stretching his legs in front of him. He wished Kanauchi would stop smiling.

But Kanauchi's smile was widening. 'I perceive that you find it difficult to believe that this is actually happening,' he said. 'I assure you that it is. We have a very serious point of view, Mr Cronin. Now please, as I believe that time is short, I would like to know exactly what Captain Ikeda is planning for the *Eastern Dream*.'

Cronin discovered that he was sweating, which was remarkable for a fellow who was freezing cold. 'I told you,' he said. 'Your friend the captain omitted to tell me what he had in mind. I wish you'd believe that. I'll admit he has plans. He said so when we met earlier this evening. I was frankly appalled. You don't have to tell me how dangerous it will be to attempt to regain control of the *Eastern Dream*. So he then suggested I go home to bed for an hour or two, and we'd talk about it again on our way down to Nagasaki tomorrow morning. Only, you see, you fellows didn't wait until morning.'

Kanauchi, continued to smile, and while doing so he clapped his hands together sharply. There was a brief silence, as if even the very mountains were holding their breath. Then from behind the partition came a sudden thin wail of agony.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HILARY MAITLAND waited a full two minutes before she turned the key. She had the strangest feeling that events were out of control. Kanauchi had warned her that this would happen. Oh, God damn him. She wondered what he was doing now. Whatever it was, he would be smiling.

He had been smiling the first time she had ever seen him and she had found it repulsive. Yet when he had suggested they eat together she had accepted, partly out of sheer necessity. She had earned her living from Marseilles to Calcutta by strumming on her guitar, the idea of a stray European appearing in their bars had tickled quite a few people east of Eden. Besides, she played well, she was extremely good-looking, and she had the outward appearance of being that mysterious European invention, a lady.

This, remarkably, had never been an act. She had never cared for alcohol, she found nicotine a bore, and there was nothing else she could reasonably smoke in public, and as she was well aware that her body was her principal asset, it was not for display except if suitably paid for. Those who had paid the price had always been delighted in her surprising lack of inhibition. She regarded men as the source of all evil in the world, but she was prepared to accept the world as she found it, however unsatisfactory it might be, and she enjoyed knowing that she could earn enough to keep herself sometimes for a week merely by allowing a man to amuse himself with her reproductive organs.

So, Yoshiyue Kanauchi obviously had had the usual idea in mind, she had supposed, and she found the prospect of him more amusing than any. He was so small and insignificant in appearance, and it was clear that he was as blind as a bat without his enormous glasses. He was a man who could be dominated without the slightest effort on her part when the time

came She might even get away with using her hands, which she found infinitely satisfying, for the sense of mastery it gave her

She had believed

And instead he had leaned on his elbow on the far side of the table and watched her pour his saké for him and had said, almost non-committally, 'Why do you hate so much, pretty little girl?'

'Not a bloody head shrinker,' she had replied and immediately been ashamed of herself that she should have been reduced to such a retort But she doubted he had even heard her

With Kanauchi, after that so unpromising beginning, she had known passion Perhaps she would know passion again She was not sure, because Kanauchi's passion might demand her death He would say, 'Nonsense' She should be prepared to die, but as long as she was, Kanauchi had said, it would never happen The unfortunate beautiful bewildered Mrs Maitland, left behind on the deserted tanker, would evoke more sympathy than condemnation Kanauchi had shrugged 'Five years? At the very most'

Five years To have achieved this tremendous blow at Them But that was before the killing had started She had not actually killed anyone, yet She had given way to her hate only with Joanne But that could be adjusted If she were to allow Joanne to go over the side, to escape, without John knowing there was a way to make sure of sympathy

Because now she was afraid That she would never know Kanauchi's passion again? She had suddenly realized, looking at the splintered bone thrusting its white and red misery upwards through Sanding's thigh, that she was not going to be able to go through with it With any of it And in the beginning she had welcomed it She had been going to blow the ship anyway the moment Kanauchi signalled that he had the money What a magnificent way to go And the others? Why, they would have to come with her, wherever she took them

So it hadn't mattered then who got killed first. It had been all to the good to thin the numbers, to reduce the chance of someone trying to stop her. For that she would even have been prepared to kill John himself.

Until last night.

For three years she had been a part of it, playing in that time another rôle, the rôle of the sort of person she had always hated more than the rest. Captain John Maitland's wife. Suddenly a woman of importance. Cocktail parties, with all the directors and their fancy wives, their hand-made shirts, and their three-hundred-dollar suits. Playing such a role had been just wonderful. Not only because of the contempt she could feel for them but because of the sheer exhilarating danger of her position. John could have changed his mind and dumped her at any moment during those three years. And she would have been helpless if he had done it right.

This was the strangest and most upsetting thing of all. In the beginning there had been nothing but contempt on her part. And obviously there had been contempt on his part as well, self-contempt. Then slowly she had watched the man re-emerging. It had shown itself that night when *he* had told Kanauchi just how this thing could and should be managed, and she had goggled, she had never supposed it was possible for anyone to tell Kanauchi anything. So she had respected him. Yet she had played the role ordained by Kanauchi. She had made John fall in love with her by remaining a mystery, by never giving way to her hate hysteria when in his company, by granting him her body without ever surrendering it.

In many ways, she thought with a curious sense of satisfaction, theirs had been a marriage.

Three years, waiting just for this. She threw open the door and smiled. But it was a humourless smile, an act for the benefit of the poor creature inside.

There was no sound. Hilary switched on the light, gently closed the door behind her, and walked across the living room.

The door to the bedroom was open, but she could not see the bed

'Jo,' she said softly, something terrible has happened Eddy is dead He and John had a fight, and Eddy was shot Jo, everything is getting out of control Would you like to get out? I can get you out, Jo I can show you how to get ashore'

She reached the doorway, gazed at the empty bed Empty but rumpled and still dimpled where a body had lain until recently

'Jo?' Her voice was sharp She stepped into the room, and an enormous bright light exploded in her head

Cronin was half on his feet before either of the other men moved But then they were pointing automatic pistols, and he checked, already reaching for the sliding screen

'I shall not kill you Mr Cronin,' Kanauchi said 'But with a single bullet I can break your leg Which will cause you much discomfort and not help Miss Asano in the least So you must be sensible'

Cronin stood still, gazing at the screen From beyond there came another long wail Not a shrill sound this time but rather a moan She was attempting to suppress her agony

'What,' he began and swallowed There was so much saliva in his mouth his tongue couldn't move 'What are they doing to her?'

Kanauchi smiled 'Sit down,' he invited, 'and I will tell you'

Cronin glanced at him Seven feet Certainly possible in a single long leap But at the end of it a bullet in the gut He turned and sat down, squatting like a true Japanese, preparing himself to move quickly if he had to, or if the opportunity were to arise

'I think you would like a drink, Mr Cronin,' Kanauchi said 'We have heard that you are a drinking man' He said something to the other man, who slid the outer door open to give an instruction to someone waiting outside From beyond

the inner door there was for the moment no sound, but in the stillness Cronin thought he could hear breathing. Would sweat be rolling down that magnificent face? Sweat was rolling down his own face. He mopped it up with his handkerchief.

The elderly woman came in carrying a tray with a bottle of heated saké and a cup.

'I don't like drinking alone,' Cronin said.

Kanauchi leaned forward and poured. 'I am working, and I never drink when working. Yoshiteru here does not drink at all.'

Yoshiteru closed the door, lifted the tray, and placed it in front of Cronin.

'Drink,' Kanauchi invited.

Cronin picked up the tiny cup, and looked into it. By Christ, how he wanted to drink.

He put it down.

Kanauchi smiled. 'No doubt your desire will increase. Listen.'

Almost to cue there came a thump from beyond the screen, accompanied by a sharper noise and a gasp. And then the unmistakable sound of a woman weeping.

'Do you not think this is very effective?' Kanauchi asked, apparently with genuine interest. 'You are an intelligent man, a sophisticated man, and thus it is reasonable to suppose that you have a vigorous imagination. An imagination, moreover, that has been stimulated by living in our modern world of explicit advertisement, and made into a state of readiness by your having spent some time with Miss Asano already tonight. She is imprinted on your brain, and over that picture of her delightful body is the imprint of what my men might be doing to her. Were you a fool or a dullard, this would not work. You would have to be shown, which is much less effective. But then if you were a fool it would probably be simpler to inflict pain upon you personally.'

Cronin wiped his brow. From beyond the partition Suiko spoke for the first time. She said, 'No,' very distinctly, but

in a much higher tone than she normally used. And then she gasped.

'Hurting her is no good,' Cronin said, his voice surprising even himself in its calmness. 'I can tell you nothing of Ikeda's plans. I just don't know them.'

'But hurting her is enjoyable for my men,' Kanauchi said. 'Not for me, you know. I have been through all of this. Now I merely find it boring. But they are new recruits to our organization. They hate Miss Asano far more, I should think, than they hate you or even than they hate the whole ugly structure of World Oil itself, because Miss Asano is basically one of us. She is an ordinary Japanese woman, capable of appreciating the best in civilization, who has sold her soul to a vast international machine.'

There was a sharp noise from beyond the screen and Cronin found himself holding the bottle of saké. Deliberately he turned it upside down, watched the liquid dribbling on to the mat. What a futile gesture, he thought. And yet it made him feel better.

Kanauchi smiled. 'They will first of all have undressed her, I should think. She would not have cried out while this was happening. She is a sophisticated young woman, and she must have known this was inevitable. Then, I think, they would have played with her for a moment or two, to raise her body and her mind into a state of awareness. They may even, who knows, have satisfied one or two of their more basic urges as human beings upon her before allowing the animal in them to take over. Yes, I think they would have done this. I think this may even have provoked her first cry. Does it not strike you as remarkable, Mr Cronin, how a woman who will accept almost any mistreatment from man she fancies she loves, or even in so many cases for financial reward, will yet feel she is being tortured should the same mistreatment be given to her by someone she hates or fears?'

Cronin squeezed his hand and the thick china bottle crumpled beneath his fingers. Once those fingers, suitably

bunched, had put away a very large, very strong, and very able young man with a single blow. He wondered if they still could.

'But by now, I think, they will have passed that stage,' Kanauchi said. 'They will now be concentrating upon hurting her rather than satisfying themselves.'

Once again sound came from beyond the partition, this time a long wail of the uttermost agony. Cronin found himself turning without meaning to, and once again gazed down the barrel of Yoshiteru's pistol.

'They use little sticks, like these,' Kanauchi said and took one from his pocket. It was about six inches long, tapering from quite a thick haft to a point finer than a toothpick. 'It is amazing,' Kanauchi said, 'what can be done with these. Under nails, into ears, and other places, you know.'

The wail came again, more shrill, more urgent than before. Cronin watched his fingers spreading. He wanted to curse, to shout, to scream himself. And he wanted a drink.

'There will be almost no marks,' Kanauchi pointed out. 'To mark someone is the final act. For what is a little accumulation of blood beneath the skin, especially where perhaps even the skin is not readily visible? But we have not got all night, we are already close to daylight. Much as we do not wish to mark Miss Asano, we must now start to think in terms of doing this, if there is no other way to force you to tell us what we want.'

His hands came together again in a sharp slap, and there were heavy sounds from beyond the partition. 'She will, of course, be reluctant to move. Or unable to move at this moment. But now they will tie her hands to a ring in the floor and they will commence to whip her. The lash, Mr Cronin, is made of steel wire. Each time it touches her flesh it will remove some of it. It makes quite a pattern, you know. Of course the whole thing must be done very skillfully, because too much enthusiasm, or the slightest carelessness, can cause death.' He paused and smiled. 'So now,

Mr Cronin, she will be in position, her wrists tied to the ground in front of her, her back suitably arched, but as yet unmarked I really would recommend that you co-operate, Mr Cronin'

Cronin gazed at him and licked sweat from his upper lip 'You'll be committing murder,' he said in a low voice 'Because I can tell you nothing about Captain Ikeda's plans And while you are about it, Kanauchi, you had better kill me as well Because if you kill Miss Asano, so help me God, I am going to break your neck into a dozen little pieces, if it takes me the rest of my life to get hold of you'

For just a moment the smile left Kanauchi's face But it was back almost immediately 'You are a man of unsuspected passion, Mr Cronin But I am an optimist I still hope that when you hear Miss Asano's screams you will be sensible'

His head turned as the outer screen slid aside The old farmer bowed and spoke rapidly in Japanese Kanauchi looked at his watch and asked a question, the man gave a lengthy reply

Kanauchi nodded, issued some orders, and stood up 'Perhaps I am worrying needlessly The police have left Tokyo with the ransom money The news has just come in And Ikeda is with them Perhaps the mere fact of our having kidnapped you has decided him against any stupid action'

Cronin's breath released itself in a long sigh 'Then you have no further use for us'

Kanauchi smiled 'Oh, I think we shall find some more use for you, Mr Cronin Right now, I am sending you away You will go with Yoshiteru here We shall meet again, you and I Soon'

'I'll look forward to that,' Cronin said 'Will Miss Asano be coming with me?'

'Ah no,' Kanauchi said 'I think it would be better if you were separated If you are a useful hostage to us as regards Captain Ikeda, she is a useful hostage to us as regards you You want to remember that, Mr Cronin I do promise you

that if you were to behave in such a way that my men found you unmanageable, I should certainly kill her. Now you will go with Yoshiteru.'

At last the road was smooth. For too long the minibus had bumped over a track, and Cronin, forced to lie on the floor, had felt more and more uncomfortable. He seemed to have a separate bruise in every part of his body, and his head continued to bang in time to the bouncing of the car. But at least they had not bothered to tie him up. Not that he supposed this was necessary, as there were two men sitting above him, each with a pistol in his hand, and he supposed the sound of a shot would not travel very far over the growl of the engine. One of the men was Yoshiteru, the other was one of the two Japanese who had taken Suiko into the inner room. He was a large sleepy-looking youth who held his gun carelessly. No doubt he had been equally careless when doing whatever he had done to Suiko. Cronin studied him with great care. He didn't ever want to forget a single line on the man's face.

And now it was daylight, and he could see quite clearly that there was some additional tension among his captors. The driver kept talking and the two men in the back kept making monosyllabic replies while every so often they peered anxiously through the windows.

Cronin also gazed out from his angle, but with equal interest. The air was a good deal warmer than it had been, caused not entirely by the rising sun. Earlier there had been mist, but now he could see the sky and an occasional telegraph pole. There were no mountains or trees, which suggested they had come down to the plain. There were no houses either, which indicated that they had not returned to the huge Tokyo-Yokohama area, but had travelled west, over the Hakone Mountains and down to the lowland of Japan, the Kwantô.

So eventually, if they kept on going, they would turn south,

making their way down the peninsula towards Kyushu and Nagasaki. But driving, this would take them a long time, and they would certainly arrive beyond the deadline.

Yoshiteru made a remark and the sleepy man nodded. The bus slowed and its horn blared. Then it started to move quickly again and Cronin saw the roof of a house. Christ almighty, he thought. There are people all around.

The same thought had occurred to Yoshiteru. He drew the curtains over the windows and the daylight disappeared into gloom. Yoshiteru leaned back, gazed at Cronin, pulled a silencer from the side pocket of his coat, and attached it to the barrel of his pistol. Sleepy Eyes did the same.

So, Cronin thought, if any opportunity existed it has gone begging. It is all in one's point of view. Because Cronin was a coward.

The bus stopped.

Cronin asked, 'Where are we?'

Yoshiteru merely looked at him. But the car was changing gears and moving off again. Cronin reasoned they were in some town and had slowed for a traffic light. So, they had driven for several hours since leaving the farm. And they had come down from the mountains. Nagoya? Or was that too close? Kyoto? But Kyoto was ringed by mountains. Osaka? There was an idea. Osaka was a seaport on the Inland Sea. Maybe they were planning to move him on to a ship.

The minibus gathered speed, then slowed again. Yoshiteru leaned forward.

'You listen,' he said.

'So you do speak English,' Cronin said. 'We could have had such an interesting conversation, old son.'

'You listen,' Yoshiteru said again, his fingers relaxing and then closing again on the butt of the pistol. 'We stop soon.' 'I'm glad to hear that.'

'And then you get out,' Yoshiteru said. 'You go into house, see? No tricks now, Cronin. It is still early in the morning.'

Nobody is about Tricks, I kill you Tricks, we kill Asano You understand me, Cronin?’

Cronin nodded, unhappily, and bumped his head on the floor Yoshiteru knew the way to make sure a man was a coward

The car hummed and turned a corner ‘You can tell me where we are, surely,’ Cronin suggested

‘Osaka,’ Yoshiteru said

Ten out of ten for accurate calculation

The bus came gently to a stop Sleepy Eyes drew a corner of the curtain and peered out

He made a remark in Japanese to Yoshiteru, who in turn kicked Cronin on the thigh

‘Now, please,’ he said ‘There is nobody around and there is nothing you can do You will get down from the back of the bus and go into the house Understand, please, that we will kill you should you try to escape’

‘I get the message’ Cronin sat up, stretched his aching muscles, and then rose to his knees Sleepy Eyes released the rear door of the bus, pushed it open, and allowed some bright sunshine to enter He then got down and turned to face Cronin.

Cronin blinked as his head started to pound all over again He moved forward, sat down on the edge, and blinked again The bus was in some sort of alley, surrounded by tall stone buildings, obviously warehouses, the air smelled of the sea To the right there was a doorway, now closed More important was the fact that the bus stood alone in the alley, and that he heard the rumble of a passing vehicle nearby Obviously a public street, not fifty yards away

Cronin’s last observation was the most interesting of all Sleepy Eyes stood immediately in front of him, hands deep in the pockets of his topcoat, the bulge of the pistol showing clearly through the cloth Yoshiteru, still inside the bus, was immediately behind him For just this moment the Japanese faced each other, with Cronin between them, they could

hardly fire without standing a very good chance of hitting each other

And at just this moment Cronin suddenly no longer cared whether he lived or died. He slid forward and, as his feet touched the ground, started swinging his big right hand. And then he remembered that the last time he had done anything like this he had been wearing an eight-ounce leather glove. His fist, still travelling with all the speed of twenty years before, seemed to explode as it made contact with Sleepy Eyes' chin. The flesh split and blood spurted, and Sleepy Eyes' face never had the chance to change expression. He tumbled backwards as his knees gave way, while his hand came out of his pocket, still holding the pistol as it hit the ground. The gun shot away to the far side of the alley.

In the same movement as he threw the punch, Cronin kept on going to his left, swinging around and grabbing at the open door of the bus to stop himself overbalancing. Rivers of pain shot up his arm into his shoulder, and he was horrified to discover that he couldn't unclench his bloody right fist. But at least he was still alive, his quick movement had taken him out of the line of fire of Yoshiteru's pistol, although he could hear the *phut* of the silenced explosion as the bullet whined into the alley and struck the concrete wall.

Cronin's left hand circled around the door, and he slammed it shut with all the force he could manage. Yoshiteru was just getting out, and took the swinging metal in the face. He grunted and fell back into the bus. At the same moment the front door slammed, the driver had got out.

Every instinct Cronin possessed was screaming at him to run for it. But threads of reason were still penetrating his fear. In the first place, he would never reach the end of the alley, and in the second, whatever he had started had to be finished here. Or he was condemning Suiko to death.

He turned. The driver did not have a pistol, but he had a large wrench, and it was coming down. Cronin ducked, falling to his hands and knees. The wrench thudded on to

his back, just below his left shoulder, and his entire side went numb. But his arms had already closed around the little man's thighs, and before the wrench could descend again he had straightened, the man in his arms, and swung him against the side of the bus. The driver collapsed. Cronin let him go and he slid down the side of the bus and hit the ground. He was not dead, Cronin hoped, but at least concussed.

It was time to start all over again. Yoshiteru was coming out of the back of the bus, and Sleepy Eyes was sitting up and rubbing his chin. But Yoshiteru had dropped his pistol, and before stooping to pick it up he made the mistake of looking at Cronin, who was just starting back, holding the wrench.

Yoshiteru began to run. Sleepy Eyes just goggled, and Cronin swung his foot this time, caught him on the same place where his fist had landed. Sleepy Eyes arched backwards, and this time his head hit the ground before the rest of him. He also was out of action for some time.

Twenty feet away, Yoshiteru stooped and picked up Sleepy Eyes' pistol. But now he was behind all the way. Cronin already had Yoshiteru's pistol. They faced each other for almost a second, and Yoshiteru fired. But the bullet veered off, and he turned and ran once again.

Christ almighty, Cronin thought. I'm supposed to shoot.

He ran behind Yoshiteru, waving the pistol. 'Stop,' he shouted. 'Stop.'

He rounded a corner of the wall and gazed at a main street. A remarkably empty main street for this hour of the morning. He looked at his watch. Half past seven.

But Yoshiteru was running for the far pavement. 'Stop!' Cronin shouted again and felt foolish. He left the shelter of the alley, entered a world of shop windows filled with most exquisite collections of cameras, clothes, washing machines, radios, but no people. Huge office buildings towered skywards on his right, their fronts plastered with temporarily unlit neon signs. Their windows presented a uniform blind empti-

ness Beyond, at the end of the street, he could see a bridge across the river, and even the unmistakable shapes of masts and funnels There would be people there, but that was too far, and Yoshiteru was already going into the entrance of a subway station

Cronin ran behind him, reached the middle of the street, and watched an old man slowly pedalling a bicycle towards him Cronin waved 'Get a policeman,' he shouted

The man stared at him, smiled, and carefully guided the bicycle around this peculiar obstruction

'Don't you understand English?' Cronin yelled But he was already running again, panting now, great rivers of sweat soaking his shirt and running down his legs

He stumbled through the subway entrance, panted up to the ticket collector 'Do you speak English?'

The man gazed at him and at his dishevelled suit Cronin looked past him, saw Yoshiteru stepping on to the top of a descending escalator He thrust the barricade aside and ran for the stairs

The ticket collector stood up and started shouting A colleague appeared from behind one of the ticket machines and planted himself squarely in front of Cronin, but with a neat sidestep Cronin rounded him and stepped on to Yoshiteru's escalator as the gunman reached the bottom and ran into a passageway Cronin reached the bottom seconds later, dashed into the passageway just as a train entered the station The floor shook and a tremendous roaring filled the corridors A moment later he was flung against the stone wall as what appeared to be a solid mass of humanity suddenly surged at him, men and women, boys and girls, laughing and chattering, shouting and silent, the first morning commuters For several seconds they surged around him, ramming against his back, pounding the concrete floors, hurling themselves at the escalator as a tidal wave might attack a rocky shore, not sparing a glance or a thought for the dishevelled Westerner, and then they were gone, and there was an empty platform

in front of him, and a train with the doors just beginning to close

Desperately Cronin flung himself forward, thrust an arm into the narrowing aperture. The rubber-edged doors closed, squeezed his forearm, and then opened again, reluctantly. Helping hands seized his arms, and he was dragged into the middle of another mass of humanity. He caught a dangling strap, got himself upright, towering above the people around him, and gazed at Yoshiteru.

CHAPTER NINE

KEN NIMURA'S CADILLAC left the road and bumped its way on to the uneven track. The mist was thick, and it was hardly possible to make out the end of the long hood, the windshield wipers moved ceaselessly to and fro as they attempted to clear away the moisture. On either side of the car the stark hills rose sharply.

Peter Ikeda sat in front beside the driver, smoking a cigarette. Alistair Michaelson sat in the back, beside Nimura, smoking a cigar. He had just completed an all-night flight across the Pole in his private jet, but he looked as fresh as ever. Smoke filled the car. Nimura huddled in the corner and tried to breathe.

'Christ, what a place,' Michaelson rubbed the back of his gloved hand over the window, peered out. 'Are you sure this chauffeur of yours knows where he's going?'

'He knows,' Nimura said.

Ikeda stubbed out his cigarette in the already full ashtray and lit another.

'We don't want to be late,' Michaelson pointed out. 'That boy may not be much, but he's the only security officer we have.'

'Not to mention Miss Asano,' Ikeda said.

'We won't be late,' Nimura said

The car slowed gently to a stop

'Here?' Michaelson demanded. He opened his door and got out. The mist came rolling down the hills on either side, seemed to flood into the doorway.

'Be careful, Alistair,' Nimura said.

'These characters are coming to collect the dough,' Michaelson pointed out, 'not to shoot anybody.'

'I hope,' Ikeda said, and he also got out. A puff of breeze enabled them to make out the roofs of two buildings, and beyond, a deserted skating rink.

'Where the hell are we?' Michaelson asked.

'In the Hakone Mountains, Mr Michaelson,' Ikeda said. 'It is very beautiful here.'

'When you can see it, eh? What's that?' he asked, pointing.

A motorbike came bumping down the path towards them.

'He's not meaning to carry all those suitcases on that thing?' Michaelson inquired at large.

The young man on the bike was sufficiently disguised by a crash helmet and goggles. He braked a few feet in front of the car, dismounted, and smiled as he bowed. 'Good morning, Captain Ikeda.'

Ikeda shrugged.

'You have the money?' the young man asked.

'Of course,' Michaelson said. 'Now you tell us. Where are Mr Cronin and Miss Asano?'

The young man glanced at him and then turned back to Ikeda. 'And you have not been followed by any police cars?'

'That was the arrangement,' Ikeda said.

'But I must be sure,' the young man said. 'So the money will not be transferred here. Do you mind if I look into your car?'

Ikeda shrugged.

The young man opened the door by the driver's seat and peered at the controls. Then he reached past the startled

driver, seized the radio-telephone speaker, and with a single jerk tore it from its cord

The chauffeur spluttered in Japanese

'Why don't we nab this fellow?' Michaelson asked Ikeda

The young man straightened, still holding the telephone 'Because I am nothing, Mr Michaelson And were you to do that, your ship would be destroyed Where is the money?'

'In the trunk,' Ikeda said 'Do you want to see it?'

'It is no concern of mine,' the young man said 'I just had to make sure that there is no telephone in your car Now you will continue along this track I am afraid it gets a little bumpier But within a mile you will start to descend again, gradually, and then about two miles farther on you will come to a lake My people will meet you there'

'Like hell they will,' Michaelson said 'Our instructions were that the money would be picked up right here'

'No, sir, Mr Michaelson,' said the young man 'We said we would meet you here We have done this Now you must go to the delivery point' He walked away from the car, climbed on to his motorbike, and started the engine 'They are expecting you at eight o'clock, Mr Michaelson I would not be late'

Ikeda got back into the car 'We had better do as he says'

Michaelson grumbled as he also got in, 'I guess they hold all the shots, eh?'

'I'm afraid that's about the way it is, Mr Michaelson,' Ikeda said 'We have to manage as best we can'

The chauffeur was still muttering in Japanese, but now the car started jolting down the track, slowly descending as the young man on the motorbike had prophesied He had remained where he was, sitting astride his bike, no doubt waiting to make sure that the Cadillac wasn't being followed

'There's the lake,' Ikeda said, and the car slowed once more Beside them the steep cliffs were beginning to even out, and in front of them the water shimmered faintly in

the mist, for the sun was now trying to break through. Visibility wasn't much more than a hundred yards, however, and the lake appeared to be deserted.

The Cadillac stopped, and Michaelson was again first out 'So?'

Ikeda took an automatic pistol from his pocket, looked at it, and replaced it.

'There is still five minutes. Listen.'

A diesel grumbled through the mist, and a moment later the launch came into sight. There were three men on board—one in the bow, one on the helm, and one in the stern. They carried tommy guns.

'It would be a good idea to stay on this side of the car, Mr Michaelson,' Ikeda said.

The launch slowed and bobbed on the water, perhaps six feet from the shore. The captain released the helm and came to the gunwale. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and was smiling. 'Good morning, Captain Ikeda.'

Ikeda nodded.

'You met my messenger?' Kanauchi asked.

Ikeda nodded. Michaelson snorted with disgust and leaned on the car, peering over the roof at the terrorists. Nimura had still not got out.

'Good,' Kanauchi said. 'And you have the money?'

'It is waiting,' Ikeda said. 'But it will not float.'

Kanauchi smiled, returned to the helm, and touched the throttle, bringing the wheel around as he did so. The launch approached within two feet of the bank and the man in the stern stepped ashore. Another touch on the throttle and the launch came to a stop as Kanauchi put the engine astern. The man in the bow levelled his tommy gun at the Cadillac, and now Kanauchi picked up the one from the stern.

The man who had landed walked up the bank to the car.

'You will not try anything, Captain,' Kanauchi said. 'If we do not report to the tanker that all is well, it will be destroyed.'

'We shall not try anything,' Ikeda promised 'Where are Mr Cronin and Miss Asano?'

'They are safe,' Kanauchi said 'They will be returned in good time Now open the trunk, please'

Ikeda unlocked the trunk The man ashore looked at the packed suitcases

'Open them up,' Ikeda said

The young man unlatched the first suitcase and peered at the carefully stacked notes He closed the case, placed it on the ground beside him, then opened the second one Alistair Michaelson had come around the back to stand beside Ikeda He frowned as he watched the policeman take out a handkerchief and wipe his brow, the temperature was very close to freezing

The man placed the second suitcase on the ground and started to open the third

'Well?' Kanauchi shouted 'Is there something wrong?'

'He is checking that there is money in each,' Ikeda said

'Tell him to hurry up,' Kanauchi shouted 'You would not try to be smart with me, Captain As I told you on the telephone, I am an expert in these matters If there is counterfeit in there I will know it at a glance And we shall blow the ship'

The man shrugged, closed the third suitcase, and took it out also Ikeda removed two more, and the chauffeur lifted the last They set them on the grass and returned behind the safety of the car while the man took them, two at a time, down to the bank Kanauchi tossed his man a line, and the launch was pulled close The third man remained standing in the bow, his tommy gun trained on the Cadillac

The man began passing the suitcases on board

'I thank you, Captain, and you, Mr Michaelson, for your understanding and your co-operation Now I will tell you what you must do, Captain I wish you to send a helicopter to the *Eastern Dream* They are expecting it at ten o'clock Not one minute after, Captain. The helicopter will land on

the tanker's deck, and the men still on board will get in. Then the helicopter will fly them to the airport at Omura. There I have chartered a plane which will be waiting for them. The charter firm has nothing to do with us, and does not as yet know the identity of its passengers. It will fly the men to a destination they will name. Is that understood?'

'Of course,' Ikeda said.

Michaelson scratched the back of his head.

Kanauchi smiled. 'Do not take us for fools, Mr Michaelson. Of course, once the crew have left the ship we no longer hold any threat. Therefore one will remain. Mrs Maitland. Do not underestimate her, either, Captain. She is the most fanatical of us all. She will keep her hand on the switch which will explode the ship for three hours, until we receive the message that her partners have safely arrived at their destination and beyond the reach of the Japanese government. Then she will signal your Coast Guard cutter and surrender. Then, and only then. But, Captain, I wish you to remember that she is prepared to die, just as she is prepared to go to jail. She has been the leader of the group on board from the beginning. If you should attempt to approach the ship or to interfere with the departure of the crew from Japan, she will without doubt destroy the *Eastern Dream*.'

Ikeda shrugged.

The last of the suitcases was on board.

Kanauchi smiled and bowed and looked at his watch once again.

'You have two hours to get that helicopter to Nagasaki, Captain. Good day to you, gentlemen. We shall not trouble you again. Oh, there is just one thing more, Captain. I shall, of course, count this money immediately. I *hope* I will find nothing wrong, for the sake of Nagasaki.'

'It is a lot of money,' Ikeda said.

Kanauchi smiled, bowed again, and moved back to the helm. The launch disappeared into the mist. For a moment or two the engine chattered, and then there was silence.

Michaelson sighed 'They have got us over a barrel, Ikeda We'd better go get that helicopter'

'Of course, Mr Michaelson,' Ikeda agreed 'We must reach a telephone as rapidly as possible In addition to the helicopter, we need an aircraft to take us down to Nagasaki I must have boats out as quickly as possible'

Michaelson had already got into the car 'You'll never find them,' he said 'Anyway, what's the point in risking it? If one of your boys approaches them they might just blow the ship'

Ikeda smiled for the first time that morning

'I wish my men to search for survivors,' he said and cocked his head

The mist seemed disturbed, it wobbled around the car as if impelled by a sudden breeze, although there was none Then the sound reached them, for a moment blocking their eardrums, rattling the car windows as it rolled up the hill 'The sixth suitcase,' Ikeda said 'I am afraid they may have emptied it first'

'But' Nimura began

'It is the same principle as the letter bomb,' Ikeda explained 'Only very much larger'

'Son of a gun,' Michaelson said His tone was filled with admiration

'I think it was a crazy thing to do,' Nimura said 'What will Maitland or, apparently, Mrs Maitland do when she does not get a confirmation from her partners? And what about Bill Cronin, and Miss Asano?'

Ikeda looked grave 'I am sorry about Bill and your secretary, Ken Believe me, we will do all we can to get them back unharmed But the consequences of allowing people like these to get away with holding up an entire country for ransom outweigh one or two lives As for the *Eastern Dream*, we must put our faith in human nature Mrs Maitland will certainly not get a call confirming that the money has been safely obtained, on the other hand she will not get a call informing her that something has gone wrong either And while she is

trying to figure things out, the helicopter will appear as arranged I think she will wait for that '

'I hope to God you are right,' Michaelson said

Ikeda settled himself into the front seat and turned to look 'So do I, Mr Michaelson,' he said 'So do I But do you know, I worry more about poor Bill Cronin '

Michaelson bit the end off a cigar 'He'll manage He has a weakness for survival '

Bodies pressed close against Cronin, huddled him against the back of a seat He had never seen such a crowded train, and this one had recently disgorged several hundred people. What a way to live Or die

He looked over the heads of the passengers, towards the corner where he had last seen Yoshiteru, but there was no sign of the terrorist For a moment he sweated, wondering if he could have been hallucinating, but then common sense prevailed Yoshiteru was there all right But he would not stay there very long, the train was approaching the centre of Osaka

A short young girl wearing glasses was plastered to his shirt front She frowned as she looked down at her white blouse and then up at Cronin's face

'Your hand is bleeding,' she pointed out and seemed really to look him in the face for the first time 'Have you been in a fight?'

'Several,' Cronin said 'And you are the best thing that has happened to me in several hours Do you get off at the next stop?'

Her frown deepened 'Yes It is the shopping arcade I work there '

'Well,' Cronin explained, 'as you can see, I'm not at all a desirable character to have around When the train stops, I shall also get out When that happens, I should like you to find me as many policemen as you can '

'Policemen?'

'With guns, if they happen to carry things like that around here. And just in case they don't speak English, would you hang around as well to do some talking for me?'

'I do not understand you. You are not feeling well?'

'I'm feeling a whole lot better since running into you.'

The train was slowing. 'Please, sweetheart, this really is a matter of life and death. There's a bloke over there who is very bad medicine. If I don't manage to get hold of him soon, he is going to cause a lot of trouble.'

The girl gazed at him and said nothing. The train stopped and the doors opened. Cronin had no choice about where he was going, he was carried forward in the middle of a mass of humanity which spread out of the door and on to the platform where it merged with similar crowds erupting from all the other doors. To suppose Yoshiteru was not among them was so much wishful thinking.

Ahead of him was an escalator. Yoshiteru obviously held his own survival foremost, but he was a terrorist and he might just be getting worried enough to start shooting. Cronin felt unhappy about the prospect of standing still on a slowly moving staircase. He bounded towards the steps, attempted to push his way upwards, and was brought to a halt by a solid mass of panting humanity. He had even lost his girl friend, but he thought she was a few steps higher up, keeping her back turned to him with great determination. She had spoken English, and there might be others around who did also. He wondered what they would do if he started shouting for help. On the other hand that might just encourage Yoshiteru to open up.

He wished the Japanese were a taller race, and he tried to hunch his shoulders.

The escalator slid into the top of its belt and he was walking, still carried by the crowd, past the ticket collector, who was far too busy to notice who did and who didn't have tickets. Now the people began to disperse. They were still a long way from the street, Cronin estimated, but in surroundings of quite

startling beauty—the immense underground shopping centre beneath the city of Osaka. He stood on a broad street with an open cafe on his right in which several young people were enjoying a morning cup of coffee, served by pretty waitresses in red dresses and white caps. On his left, extending the length of the street, was a large artificial lake, dotted with moss-covered rocks and hidden fountains shooting multicoloured spouts of glistening water into the air, and filled with brilliant-coloured fish. On the far side of the lake and beyond another street there were several shops, just opening their doors to the public. A concrete mezzanine loomed twelve feet above him, with a well down to the lake in the centre; above that there were more doors before the domed ceiling was reached, perhaps forty feet up, and just below the level of the open-air street. The centre glowed with a muted light and there was surprisingly little noise, although everyone was moving and talking, opening newspapers and setting down cups.

And for the moment there was no Yoshiteru.

Cronin moved along the street, quickly yet trying not to appear too urgent. His brain raced like a runaway train, and was linked with one too. Suppose Yoshiteru *had* remained on board? But that tumultuous rush would surely have carried him along as well. And surely he would have wanted to get out. He could not be very far away. Cronin straightened his tie and buttoned his jacket, tucked his injured hand into his pocket, and found himself looking at the centrepiece of the whole arcade, the waterfall which descended from the roof at the far end of the street, cascading downwards in a flowing rainbow of pinks and soft blues, bouncing off rocks before it splashed into the still waters of the lake. And in the very centre of the waterfall an elevator was slipping down, its occupants peering out of their glass cage through the tumbling water at the wonder world they were entering.

At the foot of the elevator shaft there was already a waiting line for the upward journey, third from the front was the unmistakable figure of Yoshiteru.

'Hey,' Cronin bellowed without thinking Yoshiteru turned and stared

'Christ almighty,' Cronin muttered and felt the pistol in his pocket But to start shooting down here, with so many people about, was an impossible thought And the elevator was settling into its base

'You are Mr Cronin,' said a voice at his elbow

Cronin turned, gazed at three policemen and his girl friend from the train

'How the devil

'You are the man from World Oil who was kidnapped,' the policeman explained 'Your picture was flashed on every television screen and circulated to every police station in the country last night Did the kidnappers let you go?'

'No,' Cronin said 'There's one right over there' He pointed to Yoshiteru, elbowing people out of his way, pushing into the emptying car Now he had his gun in his hand, and as he faced the doorway the crowd behind him shrank back Then the doors were closed, and the elevator started its ascent

The policemen began shouting in Japanese, and people began to run for shelter The elevator, halfway up and opaque behind its fringe of water, slowly came to a halt, suspended between floors The policemen were still shouting, and they started to move forward Yoshiteru stared at them through the glass

He was done and he knew it Having stopped the upward progress of the car, the operator would now bring it down Yoshiteru gazed at Cronin, his face twisting Then he struck the glass partition twice with the butt of his pistol The thick glass shattered and the arm holding the pistol came out

Cronin grabbed the girl with the glasses and pulled her into shelter behind the stone parapet surrounding the lake People screamed and scattered even farther, into doorways and behind chairs and tables The police were still shouting, but Yoshiteru ignored them The hand holding the pistol was straightening it sought and found Cronin Cronin drew his own pistol

and gazed at it in distrust. He was no shot. In fact he had never actually fired at any living object in his life.

The hubbub, spreading across the arcade, was punctuated by several sharp noises. Only one explosion came from Yoshiteru's gun. The bullet struck the water nearby. Cronin and sent up a fountain of its own. But the glass wall of the elevator cage was splintering in every direction as the police returned fire.

Yoshiteru put his other hand against the wall to stop his fall and then slumped forward, the front of his topcoat turning red. He struck the weakened glass, and it parted. For a moment his body seemed to hover, and then as the screams rose he fell forward, half turned a somersault, and plummeted into the shallow water of the lake.

Cronin released the girl and ran forward. The crowd advanced with him, leaving their shelters and splashing across the lake. Yoshiteru lay on his back, water pounding on his face. Deep red spread outward from the inert figure into the water.

CHAPTER TEN

MAITLAND paced the navigation bridge from one wing to the other, slowly and methodically, his hands clasped behind his back. This morning he was wearing correct winter uniform, his tie knotted firmly, his hat at its usual angle. He was John Maitland, captain of the *Eastern Dream*, for the last time.

For how much longer? Every time he passed the chart table he hesitated. The binoculars lay there, waiting to be used to search the sky. It was such a magnificent morning, with such perfect visibility that he could pick out every ravine in the mountains which surrounded the ship, almost make out people on the shore two miles away with the naked eye. The seaman in him suggested that air so clear portended a

storm But that was no longer his problem And looking for the helicopter was a waste of time It was only nine o'clock, an hour too early

Why the hell didn't Kanauchi call? But of course the delivery of the money was completed The Japanese government and World Oil had been bending over backwards from the very beginning to meet the demands of the terrorists An exploding *Eastern Dream* was something they just dared not risk Old Michaelson might have tried to pull a fast one by sending out Bill Cronin, but even that had backfired Now Kanauchi had Cronin as well and an even stronger hold on the situation

Kanauchi would call as soon as he was sure Meanwhile there was only an hour to wait. There was no point in picking up the binoculars and sweeping the horizon for another fifty-five minutes. He could put his time to better use by coming to a decision regarding Hilary

Footsteps sounded on the outside ladder. He turned, muscles tensing, sweat breaking out on his neck Christ, he was anxious

It was Porter 'Finished your breakfast, Captain Maitland?'

'Thank you, Porter, yes How is Mr Sanding?'

Porter shook his head 'Not so good, sir He's doing a lot of moaning and turning I think the drug is beginning to wear off I was wondering, sir, if I shouldn't call Mrs Maitland'

'Isn't she up yet?'

'No, sir She was looking pretty worn out last night'

Maitland nodded. 'Still it's time she woke up I think you had better stay up here, Porter I'll go down and see her, and Sanding as well' He yawned before he could stop himself 'I'm pretty tired myself Now remember, keep your eye on the radar screen and sound the alarm the moment any ship crosses the half-mile ring Look out especially for that fellow' He pointed at the Coast Guard cutter, still patrolling ceaselessly to and fro

'Aye-aye, Captain,' Porter said, obviously pleased to be left in command of the ship. Maitland thanked God for the steward's lack of imagination. It occurred to him that if he ever had to do something like this again he would select none but strong lads totally lacking in imagination. The Clarks of this world were for ever unreliable, because they always thought of what could happen. Porter could only see that he was well on his way to a third of a million dollars, a sum he probably could not actually understand.

Maitland went down the ladders. Christ, he was tired. He thought that when he got on that plane at Omura he would pass right out. But he would not do it, even then. Because Hilary would not be along. She would be on her way to a Japanese prison.

Or she would have blown the ship and be floating around eternity.

Could he allow that? He could send her with Porter and Evans and remain in her place. That would let him satisfy all his revenge and hatred and yet play the hero at the end. It was all a game, really.

Of course, it might be necessary to shanghai her on to the helicopter. But that should not be difficult.

And Clark? Mason? Large? He had not killed either Clark or Mason, and there would be no witnesses left to testify as to what had actually happened with Large, or even if he had used the knife. Because Joanne would be going with Hilary, whether she liked it or not.

And whether or not he was guilty of murder would also be irrelevant, if he decided to blow the ship.

He entered the officers' accommodation deck. The generators still hummed, it was necessary to maintain full current even now, both for the radar and for the electrical circuits to the charges. He felt a sudden exhilaration he had not experienced since the night before last, just before he had taken over the ship.

Evans was in the dispensary washing out bottles. 'How's

it going, Captain?' he asked Another good, unimaginative soul, Evans

'It's a splendid morning, Evans There was a bit of mist earlier, but it's clear now We'll get off all right How is Mr Sanding?'

'He was just about ready to wake up, Captain So I gave him another jab, and he's out again He really ought to get to a proper doctor I think he will be permanently crippled as it is'

'There are doctors on the mainland, Evans And with four hundred thousand dollars in his bank account he'll be able to afford gold crutches But I think it's a good idea to keep him under sedation It won't be long now' He looked at his watch 'Less than an hour'

He climbed the stairs to the master's accommodation, made his way along the corridor to his cabin How many times had he made just such an early morning round, after a night on the bridge due to thick weather, feeling pleasantly tired, trying to be cheerful to the men in sick bay, listening to Jimmy Dawson's complaints about his turbines—the better they ran the more Jimmy complained—knowing always that at the end of it there was his cabin, and breakfast, and Hilary This morning he had already breakfasted There would still be Hilary For the last time

He opened the door, stepped inside, knew immediately that it was empty; there was no scent Yet he crossed the living room, frowning, opened the door of the bedroom, went on through to peer into the bathroom, scratched his head He had not seen her since ten o'clock last night when she had been on her way to bed But she had been going to stop at Joanne's first, to tell her Eddy was dead. And for what else? he wondered

He left and walked to the Clarks' door It was locked He knocked 'Hilary? Hilary, are you in there?'

No sound Yesterday afternoon the key had been in the outside lock Now . he stooped, put his eye to the hole The

key was not in the lock at all So Hilary had taken it out as she went through

He straightened and felt the panic welling up in his belly He'd forgotten in the excitement and the bravura of the past thirty-six hours just how much he depended on Hilary And it was so important that she be here, alert and confident, this morning

The pistol was already in his hand He backed away from the door, fired three times, then stooped to peer at the wood Only the surface of the wood was shattered

Feet pounded on the deck and Porter appeared 'Captain Maitland? Captain Maitland, sir?'

'For Christ's sake, what are you doing here?' Maitland bellowed 'You're supposed to be on the bridge'

'I heard shooting, sir'

'So you bloody well heard shooting,' Maitland yelled 'The door's locked Now get the hell out of here and back on watch'

'Yes, sir' Porter hesitated, glancing at his captain with a frown 'You won't get through that door with a pistol, sir You want to use the fire axe'

He disappeared through the bulkhead door Maitland panted, staring at the pistol in his hand, started as glass broke behind him

Evans carried the axe 'He's right, Captain Here, let me have a swing' He arranged himself in front of the door, legs spread, spat on his palms He was a big man 'Mrs Maitland locked in, is she?'

'I don't know,' Maitland muttered 'Christ, I don't know where she is'

Evans swung the axe, and the blade bit into the polished wood Again he swung, and the blade landed again with perfect accuracy, splintering the first crack Again and again Evans swung, and the centre panel of the door started to disintegrate.

Evans swung the axe once again The door splintered, and after three more blows he dropped the axe and used his hands

to tear out the panel, opening enough of an aperture for Maitland to squeeze through

'Hilary?' he called 'Hilary?'

There was no sound Sweat pouring down his neck, Maitland ran across the living room towards the bedroom door With Evans behind him, he pulled it wide and gazed down at his wife She lay face down on the carpet next to the bed, **arms outspread, hair scattered** around her She no longer bled, but the huge wound in the top of her head was still an ugly red gash against the black of her hair

'Oh, Christ,' Maitland moaned 'Oh, Christ ' He dropped to his knees, turned her over

Evans slowly stooped, picked up the hammer Blood was thickly coated on the head 'Now there's a funny thing to keep in a bedroom,' he said half to himself 'But then, Mr Clark was always tinkering around making things, repairing things himself '

'Shut up,' Maitland said, and it was a tone Evans had never heard before 'Shut up, God damn you '

Hilary lay on her back now, her head resting on his knee. Her mouth was slightly open, her eyes staring at the deck overhead

Evans licked his lips 'She's not '

'She's dead ' Maitland lowered her head, stood up

'But it must have been Mrs Clark,' Evans slowly reasoned 'God almighty, she was always such a proper woman. Where do you think she went, Captain?' He looked around him, an enormously frightened man 'Think she went over?'

Hilary is dead, dead, dead No more playing the hero to impress her now, Maitland thought Christ, how he hated them all.

'I don't know where she is,' he said 'I'd have heard her if she went over I think she's on board, somewhere '

'But supposing she interferes with something?' Evans said

'With what?' Maitland demanded. 'Joanne Clark doesn't

even know the bow of a ship from the stern. She's always prided herself on her ignorance. Well, wherever she's hiding, she can bloody well stay there. I'm going to blow her into nothin. Nothin.'

Evans licked his lips. 'Captain Maitland.'

Maitland glanced at him. 'Oh, don't worry, Evans. You'll get off. You and Porter and Sanding. Have I ever let any of you down? So long as you played straight with me? But someone has to stay with the ship, eh, Evans? I'll look after that. You just stop worrying. And get out. The helicopter will be along in less than half an hour. Just leave me alone.'

'Yes, sir, Captain Maitland. Yes, sir.' Evans backed to the door, tripped over the axe, hastily picked it up.

Pausing in the doorway, he turned. Maitland was kneeling beside his wife.

The trainer jet screamed to a halt on the runway at Omura, and Cronin was out of the back seat almost before the ground staff could get the hatch open. He slid down the ladder to the ground, ran towards the group of men waiting beside the helicopter.

'The boy himself,' Alistair Michaelson said and pointed before extending his hand. 'Billy boy, I'm glad to see you.'

'I'm glad to be here, Mike. Peter.'

Ikeda held up his hand. 'Now just relax, Bill. We waited for you.' He looked at his watch. 'But it is time we were going. The man said ten o'clock.'

'Yes, but listen,' Cronin said. 'The girl, Miss Asano, Ken's secretary—where's Ken?'

'He went back to Tokyo,' Michaelson said. 'My idea. I figured it would be best to have him holding down the publicity end from there.'

'Yes, but listen,' Cronin tried to get his thoughts straight. Christ, how he wanted a drink. 'Listen. I'll talk to you about Ken later. Right now there's this girl. Suiko. A no.'

'She's all right, ill,' Ikeda said. 'Really and truly. The mes-

sage came through not five minutes ago. My boys picked up a survivor from the motor launch, and he told them where the farm was. They went there straight away and found the girl, unharmed.'

Suiko, unharmed. He felt like crying. But his brain was still whirring away.

'What do you mean, a survivor from the launch? What happened to Kanauchi? To the ransom?'

'All in good time, Bill. All in good time. But you have nothing to fear from Kanauchi any more, he is dead. This man was one of his accomplices, just about frozen to death, and anxious to help us.'

Cronin's heart was shooting around between his lungs and his throat, causing no end of trouble to the various organs it was bumping. 'And she's all right? Thank God. But she's not that unharmed. She has to be got to a hospital.'

'Stop worrying, Bill. She is being taken care of. We have more important things here at hand. The tanker.'

Michaelson said, 'I figure it's about time you should tell us what you have in mind, Peter. I'll tell you, this whole project has me nervous.'

'When we are off the ground,' Ikeda said, 'I will tell Bill what he has to do.'

'You're not seriously going to try to take over the ship?' Cronin demanded.

'Of course I am, Bill. I told you that I would do so.'

'And I'd say he has a pretty good chance,' Michaelson said. 'Having seen what he did to those characters in the launch.' He looked at his watch. 'It's ten to ten. Hadn't we better be off?'

Ikeda nodded. 'But not you, Mr Michaelson.'

'What?'

'This is a very dangerous operation, Mr Michaelson. It is possible that something might go wrong, and lives may be lost. Now, I will not deny that I desperately need someone who knows intimately the interior of one of your tankers, and I

would have used you had I no alternative. But, as Bill is here, I will take him instead.'

'Now, look here!' Michaelson declared, pointing 'This happens to be my ship, and it was fifty million dollars of my money that you cheerfully blew up.'

Ikeda shrugged 'What is money? Just an entry in an account, to World Oil. But you, Mr Michaelson, you *are* World Oil.'

'The man's right, Alistair,' Cronin said 'Anyway, you sent me out here to clear up this mess, and by God I want to clear it up. But before I go——'

'We are leaving now,' Ikeda said, climbing into the helicopter. The blades were already starting to turn.

Cronin said, 'Listen, Mike, this was an inside job.'

'For God's sake,' Michaelson said 'Don't you think I know that?'

'Deeper than you think,' Cronin shouted as the blades gathered speed 'Check on the Nimuras. Don't do anything until I come back. But if I don't, check on the Nimuras.' He clambered into the helicopter, and the crewman pulled the door shut. Cronin sat and asked, 'I don't suppose anyone would have a drink?'

'Alas, no,' Ikeda said 'Isn't that a beautiful sight?'

The helicopter was gaining altitude. Below them, Michaelson was standing with his hands on his hips, glaring after them, while the downdraught whipped his tie and his jacket, pulled his shirt out of his pants, and made his hair stand on end. But now the airfield itself was dwindling, and away to the south Nagasaki spread out down the valley and towards the harbour, while the cliffs rose on either side, and now Cronin could see the sea beyond them, the ripples of surf on the beaches, and the little fishing villages which dotted the coast. When he had been here three years before and Suiko had brought him down to Nagasaki to see the tankers, she had taken him by car over the hills for a tempura lunch in one of those villages. He remembered the day well, from the endless row of moored fish-

ing vessels, all painted white with identical red and yellow decorations on their wheelhouses. Then she had taken him to an upstairs room in the little restaurant where they had sat opposite each other on the tatami mats, with the low table between them, and he had watched her eating raw fish, not yet properly dead, as she had delicately removed the flesh from its ribs.

It had been on that afternoon perhaps that he had fallen in love with her, although he had done nothing about it for another fortnight, had left it in fact until his last night in Tokyo. As it had been almost too late last night and this morning. He still couldn't believe that the events of last night were anything more than a dream, except when he looked down at his swollen right hand. But now it was over. For Suiko, certainly. She was all right and they would be all right together, once he got back from this last little adventure.

Ikeda tapped him on the knee. 'Now listen very carefully to me, Bill. You are feeling all right?'

'I think so. Ready for one last push, anyway.'

'That is all we need. The pilot is going to put the helicopter down on the deck, as arranged. Once there, Captain Maitland and his male accomplices are going to get on board. So far as we know there are five of these: First Officer Clark, Quartermaster Mason, Radio Officer Sanding, Officers' Steward Porter, and Medical Steward Evans.'

'And Hilary Maitland,' Cronin said.

'Ah, no,' Ikeda pointed out. 'But there should be Mrs Clark as well.'

'Christ almighty,' Cronin said. 'You don't mean she's still on board?'

'I am afraid so. Which makes it all the more important that we carry out this operation successfully. The terrorists' idea is that Mrs Maitland will remain on board, to activate the explosive, until her husband and his crew are safely in China, for I presume that is their destination.'

'But that means she is deliberately sacrificing herself.'

'Quite A sacrifice which has me deeply worried, I must tell you She can have no hope of escaping with less than ten years in prison, and that is a very long time to a young and pretty woman I am afraid that she may well be considering suicide I am telling you this so you will have no doubt at all that we *must* succeed'

Cronin said, 'I still don't see how we are going to do it So we will be on the main deck, and Hilary will be on the bridge, watching us If anyone tries to move towards her she'll blow the lot'

'Agreed We must manage to remain on board by an accident This pilot is the best we have He is a volunteer as is the crewman Now, we shall land the helicopter on the deck, as I said, and take the men on board, as arranged We shall then lift off, all in order It is at that moment that something will go wrong with the engine'

'You have got to be joking', Cronin said

'I have been into this thing very carefully, Bill Ken Nimura and I have been right over the plans for *Eastern Dream*, and he is of the opinion that the decks are strong enough to take any slight mishap'

'Ken Nimura Look, chum, all it needs is a spark, and up she goes'

Ikeda pulled his ear 'I never pretended to you that this would be either safe or simple, Bill We are not planning to crash the helicopter, that would be too dangerous We are planning to lift off, suffer engine failure, and make an emergency landing on the deck I may say that in order to reduce the risk of any explosion, we have emptied the tanks We have just sufficient fuel to get us to the tanker'

'Christ almighty' Cronin stood up, peered past the pilot's shoulder The needle on the fuel gauge was hovering around the empty mark 'You are stark raving mad'

'I was put in charge of this operation because I am not afraid to take risks. I hope you are not either, Bill'

'Not if there is some slight prospect of it coming off Okay

So the engine cuts out and we settle back on to the deck. What happens then?’

‘There will be an inevitable delay while we attempt to get the helicopter working again. Are you a good shot, Bill?’

‘No.’

‘Well, take this pistol anyway. It may be of use to you. I am a very good shot, and so is Takanawa here. We are hoping that Mrs Maitland will come out of the wheelhouse and on to the wing of the bridge to see what has happened.’

‘In which case Takanawa intends to shoot her in cold blood?’

‘She is a terrorist, Bill. She is one of the leaders of the whole affair. The man you call Kanauchi himself explained this to us.’

Cronin nodded. ‘And what are her husband and his friends doing all this while?’

‘You will leave them to the pilot and me.’

‘And supposing Hilary doesn’t come out on to the deck?’

‘That is where you come in. In any event, Bill, I want you to get inside the superstructure just as rapidly as possible and disconnect the wiring. Again, going on what Kanauchi told us, and this agrees with the ideas you expressed to me last night, the trigger mechanism must be on the bridge, but the explosives themselves must be down in the hulls by the tanks. No matter what happens, Bill, you must break that circuit.’

‘Oh, sure,’ Cronin said. ‘It is going to take a little while to find the bloody thing. And has it occurred to you that if Hilary Maitland is contemplating suicide, she might just be in a slightly distraught state of mind, and the moment something, anything, goes wrong she might press the button anyway?’

‘I have considered that possibility, of course,’ Ikeda pointed out. ‘We must rely on our knowledge of human nature.’

Cronin watched the city dropping away behind them. The harbour looked brilliantly blue, and from this height he could see right down to the bottom, every patch of seaweed and almost every shoal of fish. Nagasaki Bay was once again

crammed with big and little boats, all a good distance from *Eastern Dream*, to be sure, but still within range of any possible explosion. They had come to see the hijackers get away with it, as their government had told them they would. And it could not now warn them to keep away in case the hijackers decided that circumstances had changed.

To those people down there, Peter Ikeda was not yet even a name. They'd know it well before lunch.

And meanwhile *Eastern Dream* was anchored in the exact centre of the harbour—John Maitland had always been a pinpoint navigator—an endless piece of ship, waiting. A still, silent volcano. She looked deserted.

'I reason like this, Bill,' Ikeda was saying. 'This has been pretty close to a suicide mission for Maitland, his crew, and his wife. Yet I am sure that they counted on being able to escape from the beginning. All except Mrs Maitland. But she belonged to Kanauchi from the beginning. The point I am making is that had this been a suicide mission for all of them, they would not have wasted time in making elaborate escape plans, they would have told us that they would inform us of what they required to escape after the money was safely received, and then merely blown the ship. But if the arrangement with Kanauchi from the start was that the crew should get off, leaving the ship in the care of Mrs Maitland—and after all, this is the only arrangement that makes the slightest bit of sense—I think we may count on the probability that Mrs Maitland will be reluctant to press the button until her accomplices are safely ashore. Provided she is convinced that our mishap really is an accident. Do you agree?'

'No,' Cronin said and watched the tanker appearing immediately beneath them. 'But I am praying you are right.'

The helicopter circled as it slowly came down. There were two men on deck carrying between them a third on a stretcher.

'Looks as if there may have been trouble. How many people did you figure were still on board?'

'Six, and the two women,' Ikeda said. 'Now, Bill, will you

please move to the rear of the cabin, and keep out of sight? we had to inform the nation that you were kidnapped last night, and so far as the crew of the *Eastern Dream* are concerned you are still kidnapped'

'Okay' Cronin realized he was still holding the snub-nosed police revolver, he stuck the weapon into his hip pocket and felt foolish. His headache, dulled by the pills given him by the police doctor in Osaka, was now back, together with butterflies in the pit of his stomach.

The helicopter drifted lower, on a level with the navigation bridge, and he saw a head behind the huge windows. It belonged to Maitland himself.

'Listen,' he said to Ikeda, 'something has gone wrong.'

'Now, now,' Ikeda said 'Now it is time to act, not talk.'

The base of the helicopter touched the deck of the tanker and came to rest. The blades slowly whirled above their heads. The crewman, Takanawa, opened the door and stepped down; he had left his rifle behind. Cronin peered out from the interior of the cabin, looked up at the windows of the navigation bridge, felt a strong temptation to wave.

Porter came across the deck towards them. 'All set?' he asked, glanced inside, and apparently dismissed Cronin as just another crewman.

'All set,' Ikeda said. 'Where are the other members of your party?'

'There's been a change of plan,' Porter said. 'Only Evans and me are coming. And Mr Sanding, who is unconscious. He's got a broken thigh.'

'Then where are Mr Clark and the man Mason? And the captain?'

'Mr Clark and Mason are dead,' Porter said. 'And the captain is staying on board. We'll bring Mr Sanding over.'

'Wait,' Ikeda said. 'What about the woman? The arrangement was that Mrs Clark would also be taken off.'

'She ain't here either,' Porter said.

'Do you mean she also is dead?'

'Search e,' Porter said 'Look, there's only the three o us, right? You going to han around all day? Once we're clear, you're clear He'll surrender the ship Ain't that all you're after?'

Ikeda hesitated, and it occurred to Cronin that it was a legitimate uncertainty On the other hand, it was too late to change his plans

'All right,' Ikeda agreed 'You may bring the injured man over here '

Porter nodded, turned, and gave the thumbs-up sign to the bridge Cronin remained in the shadows at the back of the cabin Christ, how he sweated, and with the door still open there was a bitter wind sweeping in from the sea and across the harbour

'Be ready,' Ikeda said 'Once they get inside they will certainly recognize you '

Cronin nodded, took the pistol from his pocket, and thumbed the chambers, as he had seen so many private detectives and policemen do on television It didn't make him feel any better or any safer

Feet sounded on the steel deck, moving slowly, occasionally stumbling

'Give us a hand, then,' Porter invited

Ikeda nodded, and the crewman climbed down again The end of the stretcher was thrust inside Sanding lay unconscious beneath a blanket Panting, Porter climbed in behind it 'Let's be off,' he id. 'That's one ship I'll be glad to see the back of '

The crewman got in behind Evans, closing the door as he did so Evans sighed and sat down, taking out a handkerchief and wiping his brow and staring past the crumpled cotton at Cronin 'Hell's bells,' he said

Porter turned, and looked down the barrel of Cronin's revolver 'God almighty,' he said 'Mr Cronin? I thought they had you '

'No,' Cronin said 'We have them '

The engine raced and the rotors whirled

'Don't try anything,' Ikeda warned 'If your captain blows the ship, we will all be killed now Your only hope is to co-operate'

The helicopter lifted from the deck with agonizing slowness 'But you can't pull anything,' Evans shouted 'I know he'll blow it Christ, he don't care nothing any more Nothing, I tell you His missus is dead Can't you get that through your heads? His old lady has bought it, and he don't give a damn I think he means to blow the girl, anyway'

He was definitely frightened But not, it occurred to Cronin, of actually being blown up

Ikeda nodded 'So you had better stick with us, both of you'

Porter uttered a long howl as the helicopter's engine coughed and the machine slipped sideways 'What's happening?' he wailed

The pilot controlled his craft magnificently It had been facing aft when it lifted, and had naturally moved towards the superstructure Now it had seemed about to turn free when the cough and the sideslip occurred The pilot wrenched the stick around as if attempting to give more throttle, and the machine went down Cronin felt his stomach coming up into his throat, and he realized that he might just be living his last moment on earth What would it feel like, he wondered? Just a split second of searing heat, and then nothing

There was a sharp noise from above his head, and an exclamation from the pilot One of the rotor blades had struck the superstructure and snapped A moment later they hit the deck once again, well aft now, and right at the forward base of the superstructure They continued to slide for a few seconds, and then came to rest almost touching the bulkhead doors

'Quick now,' Ikeda snapped and threw open the doors of the helicopter 'And remember,' he said to Porter and Evans, 'you make a mistake now and we will all go up'

The pilot had turned, keeping his pistol on them Cronin was already through the doorway, panting, into the crew's quarters, hesitating, as he was uncertain which way to go The

engine room beckoned him, but he couldn't tell what trippin device they might have put on the wire, or even how soon he would be able to locate it. On the other hand, they were still alive, he thought he could hear Maitland's voice shouting questions from the bridge, only seconds away.

Cronin ran up the stairs to the officers' accommodation deck. Christ, how exhausted he was, and how bloody big the ship was. Too bloody big. And too bloody silent. Even the noises from the deck were muted.

Another flight of stairs and he was on the master's accommodation deck. The navigation bridge was immediately above him now. He opened the bulkhead door, stepped on to the deck itself, checked, listening. He heard water gushing from the hose. Ikeda had made them connect the hydrant and spray the deck to prevent the risk of a spark igniting even the small amount of fuel remaining in the helicopter. They would all be scurrying around down there, watched by Maitland on the bridge, Maitland, uncertain what to do, unsure if the accident might not be as legitimate as it appeared.

Cronin climbed up the outside ladder until his eyes were on a level with the deck above. The door into the wheelhouse was closed. He continued up, then slowly slid on his belly over the deck towards the door. Here he rose to his knees, drew the revolver from his pocket. His left hand twisted the door handle and he rose to his feet and stepped inside in the same moment.

'Don't do it, John,' he said.

Maitland, standing on the far side of the wheelhouse and peering through the huge sloping windows, turned. For a moment a remarkable expression crossed his face, then he almost smiled. 'Billy Cronin,' he said half to himself. 'The television said that Kanauchi had done you.'

'They got it backwards,' Cronin said. 'I done Kanauchi. With a little help from my friends.'

'And that helicopter set-up was your idea, I suppose,' Maitland said. 'It all seemed a little too pat to me. But I must congratulate the pilot.'

'You should,' Cronin said 'He's a raving genius. You'll meet him downstairs. Come along, Johnny' He moved the gun. 'I've become almost used to waving one of these things around over the past twenty-four hours'

'Don't be a fool, Billy boy' Maitland leaned on the binnacle, his hand close to the telltale wire which Cronin had just spotted, leading from beside the steering compass down through the deck, while on the binnacle itself was the little black box 'I'm not going anywhere except straight up I was just delaying for five minutes to see if there was a chance of Porter and Evans and Sanding getting off But if they're not, well then we may as well all go together'

Cronin fired, before he intended The bullet whined past Maitland's shoulder and shattered the wheelhouse windows. Maitland half turned to look, perhaps in surprise that Cronin should have done such a thing Cronin was already crossing the bridge, propelling himself forward, hands outstretched But Maitland had turned back, and he almost smiled as he flicked his arm to catch Cronin on the side of the head and send him rolling across the wheelhouse against the chart table

'Bloody fool,' Maitland said 'I don't know how you made out amongst the Japs, Billy boy, but you're in no shape to take me on Bloody soak'

Cronin sat up and shook his head Where the hell was his revolver? It had fallen from his grasp and gone skidding across the bridge The alley at Osaka all over again, only now he was on the receiving end

'So now we say goodbye to sunny Nagasaki,' Maitland said, took a deep breath, and pressed the switch on the box

Cronin discovered he had closed his eyes He opened the again very slowly Maitland was still staring at him, apparently holding his breath. Now it came out in a rush, and he turned to the box

'Christ almighty,' Cronin said, reaching his knees. Maitland ran for the door

Cronin reached his revolver and went after the pilot.

'Hold it,' he shouted 'Just hold it, Johnny You can't do a y-thin down there.' He stopped to lean over the bridge win and shout to Ikeda 'He's on his way down, Peter You stop hi .'

He could hear the feet clattering in front of him Going where? The engine room? Did he still have the will to blow her? Cronin was sure he had almost seen relief in those tortured eyes But it wasn't a risk he could take He pounded down stairs, along corridors, down ladders, while sweat poured out of his body and his breath came in great gasps He was on the officers' accommodation deck when he heard shots from below him He made the next flight into the crew's mess and found nothing He ran through the bulkhead door for the engine room and found Ikeda sitting on the steel deck, blood dribbling down his shoulder

The police officer waved his left hand 'He's got a gun. Down there What happened?'

'We're alive,' Cronin informed him and checked at the top of the engine room ladder Below him the control room w empty But he could still hear the clatter of shoes on steel ladders, echoing up through the hum of the generators.

He went down into the engine room There was no point in looking for the wire or snappin it here. Maitland was o his way to the charges themselves Cronin's brain tried to equal a computer If Maitland were to fire his pistol into one of the charges, would that set off the rest? There was no way of tell-in But if he fired into a charge set against one of the win tanks where the gas was accumulated, that should do the lot

He grabbed a flashlight from the row hooked to the bulk-head, slid down the next ladder, ran past the main machinery and into the auxiliary control room

'Maitland,' he shouted His voice bounced around pressure auges and off boilers 'John? Don't be a bloody fool What's the point, man?'

He checked at the top of the ladder, listening, staring down into the bulges The light was off, and footsteps sounded above

his head Muted by the steady lapping of the waves was a scraping sound

Cautiously he sat down at the top of the ladder, switched off his flashlight, and eased his feet over the edge Slowly he lowered his body on to the top step, and was checked by an explosion of gunfire as his feet were bathed in a sudden ring of light

Desperately he pulled them up again, then thrust his hand holding the revolver over the edge, and fired three times He listened to the bullets joining Maitland's as they pinged around and around the space below, and then he dropped through the hatch and slid down the ladder as the light went out

At the bottom he lay on his stomach, partly to regain his breath Holding his revolver in one hand and his flashlight in the other, he hadn't been able to break his fall

But now the time for talk was past He could hear Maitland moving again, and there was no hope of stopping him now Cronin lifted the flashlight, extended his left hand at right angles away from his body, and pressed the switch The light picked up the inner skin of the hull itself and slid along to the watertight door, now swinging open.

'Oh, Christ,' Cronin muttered He dragged himself to his feet and ran for the opening But he had only reached it when there was an explosion from inside, the unmistakable echoing crack of a pistol being fired in a confined space Cronin stood still For the second time in a few minutes he assumed he was dead

But the pistol was exploding again and again and then again The entire engine room filled with noise

Cronin sucked air into his lungs and stepped through There was light in the narrow area between the hulls from Maitland's flashlight It pointed back towards the doorway as Maitland had dropped it, bathed Cronin in so much light he felt positively naked And as he stood there the pistol cracked twice more He instinctively tensed, as if expecting the bullets

to be tearing into his body, all the time knowing that they couldn't Then he went forward, into the glare of light

Maitland lay rumped on his back He still clutched the pistol in his right hand, but his chest had dissolved into a mass of blood, he had been shot in the back while aiming at Cronin, and when he had turned, he had been shot several more times in the chest

Joanne Clark stood just beyond him She still held her pistol in both hands, and as Cronin watched she squeezed the trigger again, and when the hammer clicked on an empty magazine she looked down at the weapon in amazement

'Jo?' Cronin asked 'Are you all right?'

She raised her head, her face was bruised and her hair untidy She wore a crumpled dirty playsuit 'Hello, Bill,' she said 'I had to do it, you know He killed Eddy And Harry Large And and everybody, I guess So I killed him And Hilary' Tears rolled down her cheeks

'After disconnecting the circuit?' Cronin said 'You're a bloody heroine.'

She frowned, trying to think 'Circuit? What circuit?'

Feet clanged on the iron ladders, and Takanawa and the pilot, accompanied by Evans and Porter, arrived in their midst

'God almighty,' Porter said 'That was a bloody near thing'

Cronin scratched his head

'You'll remember what we did, Mr Cronin,' Evans said 'We disconnected the circuit this morning, just before you landed The captain, well, he was just too upset by his missus's death We were afraid he'd blow the lot anyway, with us still on board'

'You'll remember that, Mr Cronin,' Porter said 'We didn't have any part in any killing We was just trying to save the ship'

Cronin nodded 'I'll remember' He took Joanne's arm, helped her past the stewards and up the ladder She was trembling, and he suspected a complete collapse was only

minutes away. He wondered how long she had lain there in the skin of the ship, virtually next to the charges, without knowing they were there, without knowing what would happen, what to do next

Peter Ikeda waited in the auxiliary control room; he had stuffed a handkerchief against the wound in his shoulder, and looked remarkably cheerful

'As I said before,' Cronin remarked, 'you need your head examined.'

'Human nature, Bill,' Ikeda said 'Human nature Your average European is not the suicidal type I knew it would work out'

Alistair Michaelson leaned on the wheel of *Eastern Dream*, and looked through the huge windows at the activity on the endless sweep of deck below him There were Japanese mechanics repairing the helicopter, and there were his own crewmen, commanded by Third Officer Clive Henry, cleaning the ship and releasing with great care the dangerous build-up of gases from the wing tanks There were craft of all sizes, no longer banished to a half-mile radius, circling around the huge ship, while camera shutters snapped and people waved and pointed and jabbered There were four big launches containing television cameras, and a small army of reporters, just waiting for the signal that the tanker was no longer dangerous so that they could come on board and take pictures and ask questions. There was an ambulance launch alongside, whose crew removed the bodies of John and Hilary Maitland There were dozens of additional policemen handling the arrest of Porter and Evans, and there was a doctor attending to Sanding Joanne Clark was under sedation in the master's cabin.

But for the moment the wheelhouse was empty, and quiet There was only himself, chewing on an unlit cigar, and Ikeda, his left arm in a sling

'You need your head examined, Ikeda,' Michaelson re-

marked, not for the first time 'Even if it did work, you still need your head examined.'

'So, had it not worked, I would have been out of a job,' Ikeda said.

Michaelson prodded the air with his cigar. 'Had it not worked you would have been dead I would have been the one out of a job. What the hell have you been doing, Bill?'

Cronin closed the door behind him, wiped his brow with a handkerchief 'Just making sure I can now guarantee that there is no explosive anywhere on this ship I can also offer my considered opinion that this ship is too bloody big Christ almighty, Alistair, what are you doing with that cigar?'

'It's not lit,' Michaelson pointed out 'And I think you are looking too damned cheerful.'

'I,' Cronin said, pointing back, 'am feeling damned cheerful I figured on being dead around now But I happen to be alive. I haven't had a drink in something over twelve hours, and unbelievably, I don't even feel like one We still have our ship And now I'm proposing to have a large lunch and then make tracks for Tokyo I assume you know which hospital Mr Asano is at, Peter?'

'No hospital, Bill She was taken to one and examined but then released She really does not seem to have been very badly hurt'

'What's between you and this Asano, anyway?' Michaelson asked

'I'm going to marry her,' Cronin said

'You have got to be joking She must be out of her mind'

'I asked her, and she said yes Any other objections?'

'If she wants you, you have my blessing But just hold on a minute, before you go rushing off You were saying some pretty odd things just before you boarded that helicopter. About Ken and his niece'

Cronin, already on his way, checked in mid stride 'I had just about forgotten that Not Ken, Mike At least I don't think so And I certainly hope not about Aya . . . Look, there

are just too many unanswered questions about her This business began to be planned three years ago, and Aya came to work for World Oil three years ago, at the age of twenty-six, mind, which is a bit ancient for a temporary typist And there is nothing in her file as to what she did before And for those three years she has been wandering around, finding out all about the business, choosing the spot and the man where she could be of most use to Kanauchi And eventually she decided on me'

'What makes you figure that?' Michaelson sounded genuinely interested

'Because when this thing started to roll, the terrorists, or Maitland, certainly, must have figured that you'd dump it in my lap, as you did, and their girl would therefore be at the centre of the investigation It was all rather obvious, really, although I managed to miss it Beryl's illness, for instance Obviously she was poisoned I hope to God she's all right'

'She is,' Michaelson said 'And she wasn't poisoned, she was sent to Majorca for a week.'

'What did you say?'

Michaelson took the cigar from his mouth and looked at it for some seconds 'The fact is, Billy boy, you weren't ever supposed to know this, and you wouldn't ever have known it in normal circumstances, but Aya Nimura works for me'

'You'll have to say that all over again'

'You heard me,' Michaelson said 'The reason she only came to work for World Oil at the late age of twenty-six was because she was busy majoring in psychology. The fact is, it is her business to supply me with confidential reports on various senior members of World Oil staff, and she obtains these by going to work for them Few executives manage to keep many secrets about their true selves from the secretaries.'

'You're not going to stop now, I hope.'

'Well, Bill, the fact is you have been hitting the bottle pretty hard these last couple of years Now, I don't give a goddamn about people talking But when I defend you to my

board I have to be sure of my facts I have to look those characters in the eye and say he may drink, but he's still on the ball, and he's still the best goddamn security chief we have or are likely to have '

'And that charade in my office night before last?'

'Oh, she dabbles in amateur theatricals from time to time I thought she was quite good '

'I thought she was overdoing it So what was her verdict?'

'I have no idea She hasn't filed a report yet But it doesn't matter now anyway She has been overtaken by events, as they say You're on the ball, Bill boy I've had that proved to my satisfaction anyway So long as Alistair Michaelson runs World Oil, Billy Cronin will run security Fair enough'

'You bring tears to my eyes,' Cronin said 'And I have some news for you, I've given the stuff up It was a promise to Suiko ' He frowned, staring at the smiling Ikeda 'But if Aya works for Alistair, and old Ken is obviously in the clear, who collected those goons to wait for me outside of Suiko's apartment?'

Ikeda sucked air into his lungs, slowly and loudly, 'I think we had better get to Tokyo, Bill, just as quickly as possible '

The lingerie shop had not changed its display It was not quite twenty-four hours since the last time he had stood here But once again Rappongo was preparing for the night

He took the stairs Just to feel what they were like going up He reached the fifth floor only slightly out of breath and knocked

Mrs Asano frowned She didn't look pleased to see him Which wasn't surprising, seeing the mess he had got her daughter into

'May I see Suiko, please, Mrs Asano?'

She bowed and stepped aside Cronin went inside, took off his shoes, watched Suiko come out of the inner room She gazed at him for a moment, her expression unreadable, before she spoke

'Bill I was so worried'

'Safe and sound, sweetheart Didn't they tell you?'

'Of course But somehow I didn't expect you to come so soon' She spoke in Japanese to her mother.

Cronin stood awkwardly looking down at her How he wanted to take her into his arms 'Does your mother know about us?'

'Of course,' Suiko said 'She is still a little shocked by everything that has happened I shall ask her to visit her friends downstairs'

'I feel that I am driving her out of her own house,' Cronin protested

'It will be my pleasure, Mr Cronin,' Mrs Asano said 'I am honoured, my entire family is honoured, that you should have chosen my daughter to be your wife' She bowed and withdrew to the door

'I would have said she had hold of the wrong end of the stick,' Cronin said His hands left his sides, to hold her shoulders, and then returned without actually touching her Christ, how nervous he was 'Suiko, are you all right?'

'Yes, Bill The doctors say I am not hurt'

'But those screams I think I'll hear them to my dying day'

Suiko smiled 'I think I was screaming before they even touched me, Bill Would you like me to run a bath?'

'I can't stop right now There are people waiting for me Suiko, you know they got Kanauchi?'

Faint lines appeared on her forehead 'I heard that the police had planted a bomb with the money, and the launch blew up'

Cronin nodded 'But they managed to fish two of them out alive Kanauchi and one other man And apparently Kanauchi just crumpled right up He's been telling the police blow by blow of the entire plot, from the beginning How they seduced Hilary Maitland, how Hilary seduced John, how John went about seducing the various members of his crew, who were

the terrorists' contacts within World Oil. It's like fitting together a jigsaw.'

Suiko's mouth had formed itself into a round O. 'Kanauchi? Speaking like that? I cannot believe it.'

'Eh?'

Her face was again expressionless. 'I mean, he did not seem the sort of man who would break under pressure, or who would be afraid.' She smiled. 'I suppose I was afraid of him myself. You must go now?'

But it was not meant as a question.

'Yes,' Cronin said. 'I must go now.' He hesitated. 'Perhaps.'

'Yes,' Suiko said. 'Perhaps, Bill.' She put her hands on his shoulders, stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the nose, very softly and quickly. 'You must hurry.'

He closed the door behind him, stood there, his shoes in his hands. Then he put them on, walked down the stairs slowly.

Ikeda leaned against the car with one of his policemen, but he straightened as Cronin appeared. 'Where is she?'

'I have no idea,' Cronin said.

Ikeda glanced at the door into the building.

'Wait,' Cronin said. 'I'm sorry, Peter. I didn't have the nerve to go through with it. I went along with you on the ship. I think this time you can go along with me. Let's clear off and give her time to get out. For Christ's sake, man, she was only a small part of it.'

Ikeda stared at him. 'But she knew?'

'She got the message, yes.'

Ikeda's jaws came together like a steel trap. 'And you think she will run away, Bill?' He dashed inside, his policemen at his heels. Cronin followed, his throat suddenly dry. She was Japanese, he had forgotten that.

The door to the apartment was open; the policemen were already inside. From the bathroom there came the sound of running water.

Cronin stopped. He wanted to vomit. Ikeda came out of the bathroom carrying something wrapped in a towel, but the pale blue of the material was already turning purple as the blood from the knife soaked through.

'Oh, Christ,' Cronin said. 'Oh, Christ. It just never occurred to me.'

Ikeda shrugged. 'Perhaps it was for the best.' He sighed. 'She was too beautiful to waste away in prison.'

As Ken had said, how many eternities ago, this hotel had the best bar in town. But after eight vodkas and tonic he was still as sober as when he started. And now the bar was empty. All the other guests were sitting down to their roast beef or their shabu-shabu. All except Cronin.

Aya leaned on her elbow beside him, he had not seen her come in. 'You really should eat something, Bill.'

'Three years,' he said to himself. 'When we first met she was already at work. Three bloody years. And when she screamed last night they were probably all drinking saké.' He turned his head. 'I had asked her to marry me. Did you know that, Aya?'

'No. But it was my advice. So you can blame me.'

'Yes,' Cronin said. 'Right now I have to blame somebody. Christ almighty, I feel small. I would just like to ask you one question. What would your verdict have been?'

'I don't think it would matter what I recommend right now,' she said sadly. 'Alistair is as pleased as punch.'

'I suppose because we saved his ship. But sooner or later he is going to remember that he's out fifty million dollars.'

'But think of the publicity,' she said. 'Don't you realize that there has been nothing but World Oil on the television screens of every country in the world for over the last twenty-four hours? And for most of that time your face has been there as well. Bill Cronin, security chief of World Oil, kidnapped by terrorists. Bill Cronin, fighting his way free of terrorists. Bill Cronin, leading the last brilliant, and successful, dash to

save the doomed tanker You are big At this moment Alistair likes to employ big people '

'That tanker thing was all Ikeda's idea '

'Oh, granted But Peter is a poor civil servant doing his job ' She leaned her chin on her hand and gazed at him from close range 'But I was going to give you a favourable report anyway I think you're an intriguing personality Worth saving from the trash can '

'Tell me, did your investigation include seducing me?'

'I rather thought you were attempting to seduce me '

'But you'd have got between the sheets '

'I really don't know,' she said seriously 'But the question really wasn't relevant You never would have '

'How can you be sure of that?'

'Because, Bill, you are basically terrified of women It has something to do with your marriage to a socially and perhaps even intellectually and sexually superior woman And I don't suppose Suiko would have helped But it is something you may need help to beat '

'Is that an invitation?'

'Let's say it's a conversational gambit,' she said